the caves of drach

hugh walters

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by the same author

BLAST OFF AT WOOMERA
FIRST CONTACT?
PASSAGE TO PLUTO
TONY HALE, SPACE DETECTIVE
MURDER ON MARS

HUGH WALTERS

The Caves of Drach

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Though its weight was more than twenty tonnes, the huge white-painted jet touched down on Palma Airport's main runway as lightly as a feather. The pilot, Captain Matthews, grinned at his young co-pilot who had been at the controls:

"Couldn't have done it better myself," he confessed to the delighted Lieutenant Brown. "Even the Old Man couldn't grumble at that."

The person to whom the Captain had referred with affectionate disrespect was none other than Ebenezer Yates, the multi-billionaire who owned this luxury aircraft. Actually Mr Yates owned so much of everything that wealth itself had become meaningless to him, except that it gave him almost unlimited power over men and materials.

Back in the lounge of the aircraft Ebenezer took up his drink approvingly. A little quirk of his was to take a full glass of whatever he was drinking and place it on a table as his plane was coming in to land. If one drop of liquid was spilled he would storm at his crew and call them all sorts of names. But there would be no malice in him and no heat in his blustering. In fact his eyes would twinkle, for he knew that his crew were only pretending to be scared, just as he was putting on an act of being angry.

He opened the door of the cockpit and put his head inside.

"Not bad," he conceded, "but no better than it should be."

"Yes sir," chorused the two officers with a wink at each other, and with a grunt Ebenezer returned to the lounge to finish his drink.

"Come on, Grandad," Ian Campbell called impatiently. "I'm dying for a swim."

He was the son of Ebenezer's only daughter, Julie. She and her husband had been killed in a car accident when Ian was just a year old, and since then the old man had done all in his power to make up to the boy for the loss of his parents. This trip to Majorca during Ian's school holidays was just such an exercise.

To tell the truth, Ian was more than a little spoiled. His grandfather gave him almost everything that he wanted, and there were always plenty of employees to do his bidding. The only one who tried to keep him in order was Smith, the old man's secretary.

Smith—no one ever seemed to use his other name—accompanied his employer everywhere. It was to Smith that the billionaire barked his orders; it was Smith who shielded the old man from anyone whom he didn't want to see; it was Smith who bought his clothes, planned his journeys and carried his money. But Ian and Smith didn't like each other.

"You can be in the sea in half an hour's time," Smith said. "We have to go to the hotel first."

Ian looked sulky. He knew that it was common sense, but he didn't like to be told it by his grandfather's secretary. Who did he think he was, anyway?

The plane door opened and one of the stewardesses stood aside for the boy to go through. Impatiently, Ian pushed his way out into the blazing sunshine and scurried down the steps on to the tarmac.

"Come on, Grandad," he called impatiently as Ebenezer descended in a more leisurely and dignified fashion. Smith brought up the rear, carrying a fat brief-case crammed with the papers that seemed to accompany the billionaire everywhere. Captain Matthews and Lieutenant Brown saluted smartly from the open door of the plane.

A huge yellow car was waiting for the new arrivals. It took less than ten minutes to go through the Customs, and then they were speeding away from Palma Airport.

They drove through Palma itself, past the vast cathedral on their right and along the sweep of the curving coast road. The harbour was crowded with yachts of all sizes, but, Ian thought, none was as big as his grandfather's yacht back in America.

The pavements were full of shoppers and the souvenir shops seemed to be doing a roaring trade. Many people were sitting outside cafés and bars, enjoying their drinks in the hot, bright sunshine. A light breeze stirred the leaves of the tall palm trees, and the white waves rolling in from the Mediterranean emphasized the blue of the warm and glistening sea.

To the right was the mountain range which runs all down the length of the island parallel to the coast. On top of the highest peak were two shining white dots. These were the former radar domes, now used for satellite tracking and space communication. They could be seen from almost every part of Majorca.

As they sped along, leaving Palma behind them, McKimm, the Scottish chauffeur, pointed out to Ian beside him the numerous hotels that were springing up like mushrooms.

"There'll no' be any grrass left on the island soon," he grumbled. "Ah dinna like it, Master Ian. It's no guid to ha' so mony folk crawlin' all o'er the place."

Ian said nothing. He knew that much of the island was owned by his grandfather, who was also, probably, responsible for many of the rash of new hotels. As long as there was a stretch of beach from which he could bathe, as long as there was a strip of sand on which to lie, as long as the sun poured down from the cloudless, blue sky—the boy was content. This vast development of Majorca that McKimm was grumbling about was none of his business. It was the concern of the grown-ups. He intended to enjoy every minute of his holiday on the island and he didn't want to listen to moans about its dire future.

Keeping the sea on the left the yellow car wound through palm woods, skirted headlands and breasted hills.

"That's where we are staying," Ebenezer said suddenly from the back seat. His pointing finger indicated a big hotel that could just be seen nestling in a palm grove. Ian made out the huge letters spelling its name. They spread all along the front roof of the hotel.

"Hotel Beverley Playa," the letters proclaimed, and Ian wondered if it was one of his grandfather's properties. As if in answer the old man leaned forward and spoke again.

"This isn't one of my places. I prefer to stay somewhere where I'm not well known. Besides," he added with a grin, "it's good to see how other people run their hotels."

The car swung off the main road and along a rather bumpy track through the trees. It stopped not at the main entrance but at a side door leading in from the car park. Scores of cars of all shapes, sizes and colours were parked, but the small grey hire-cars predominated.

Ian was, of course, first out of the car. While Smith and McKimm were unloading cases from the back and Ebenezer was marching towards the side door, Ian ran round to the back of the hotel and found the swimming pool. It looked very inviting, with its blue-painted sides and bottom. Scores of people were splashing about in it. Ian could hardly resist the temptation to tear off his clothes and plunge into its cool embrace.

Reluctantly, the boy went back to the hotel, where his grandfather was waiting impatiently for him.

"There'll be plenty of time for swimming later," Ebenezer chided. "Now come and look at your room."

The billionaire made his grandson unpack his clothes carefully and hang them up or put them away in drawers, for he believed that this was the right way to bring up a boy. But at last he was satisfied, and Ian raced off to take his swim.

A little later Smith walked down to the pool more sedately, while Ebenezer, in a flowered shirt of brilliant colours, came to sit in one of the comfortable chairs alongside. Then the secretary demonstrated his prowess in the water in a way that sickened Ian. Smith was as good at swimming as at everything else, and soon people round the pool were admiring his powerful strokes and athletic figure.

Twilight is fairly short in Majorca, and while Ian was changing from his tee shirt and trunks into a suit, ready for dinner—a formality on which Ebenezer insisted—darkness came. When he was ready Ian stepped out on to the balcony of his room to breathe in the warm night air.

In the nearby village of Paguera the lights had come on, and he could see several floodlit blocks of hotels in the distance. How much more attractive and interesting were the lights twinkling on distant mountain sides from villas or farmhouses perched way up on the slopes. Two small points of light on the very tip of a mountain showed that the space communication station never slept.

"Where are we going tomorrow, Grandad?" Ian asked at dinner.

"If it's fine—as I believe it will be—you can enjoy yourself in the pool or in the sea. I have many papers to look through with Smith. But if the weather changes there are some very beautiful parts of the island that I'd like to show you."

The arrangement suited Ian well. He would rather spend his time swimming or lounging in the sun than touring the island. It was better still when Smith was busy with his grandfather. Ian didn't mind McKimm. His perpetual grumbling rather amused the boy.

The next day was fine, and in the afternoon Ian said he would like to go on one of the twin-hulled paddle-boats that were for hire. At that moment Smith appeared from the hotel, for the old man had decided to take a nap because of the heat. Usually two people, sitting side by side, paddled the boats, but Ian didn't want Smith to be his partner. McKimm sized up the situation in a flash.

"Och! Mr Smith," he pretended to grumble, "I've just had to pay for one o' these wee boats for the laddie. Now I suppose I'll have to do all the harrd worrk paddling."

When Smith offered to pay for the boat and go with Ian, McKimm refused.

"Nay," he said with resignation. "I've paid ma money, so now I'll go to ha' ma money's worrth."

Ian flashed McKimm a grateful look and the Scotsman replied with a heavy wink. So for the next hour the pair paddled the boat over the gently heaving sea. It was an exhilarating experience, particularly when Ian decided they would challenge two nearby youths to a race. Ian and McKimm won by inches.

"Och! Master Ian," moaned the chauffeur as they paddled slowly back to the shore, "I feel as if ma legs will drrop off. I'll no' be able to walk the morn."

The weather held good for the next two days and Ian was beginning to get a splendid brown tan. On the third day black clouds covered the mountain-tops and the wind had risen. Though it would still be pleasant enough to bathe in the pool, Ebenezer thought it was time that he showed his grandson some of the island. McKimm had given the yellow car an extra polish, and Smith had collected packed lunches from the hotel. The old man gave his driver directions, and off they set.

Ian enjoyed the drive. As usual he was sitting beside McKimm. They drove round the foot of towering mountains, through groves of lemon and orange trees, past gnarled old olive trees that were said to be over a thousand years old, through mountain villages, past monasteries, churches and vast, rambling villas. Everywhere stone terraces were built up the mountain sides so that they could be cultivated.

They were making for Soller, a town on the north-west coast. Here they ate their packed lunches and then wandered about the streets and shops. Smith who—naturally!—could speak Spanish fluently, insisted on giving them a lecture on the town and its history. Ian was glad when his grandfather said it was time for them to move on.

"I think Master Ian would like a wee drrive up one of the mountain roads," McKimm said to Ebenezer. Ian hadn't thought of it, but a wink from the chauffeur made him guess that there was something in the wind.

"Ought we not to go straight back to the hotel?" objected Smith. "There may be some important messages waiting."

"Oh, let's go up the mountain road, Grandad," said Ian, entering into the spirit of the thing.

"But your messages? Your papers?" protested Smith.

"Oh, rats to them," the old man said airily. "If the boy wants to have a thrilling ride those papers can wait."

So began one of the most exhilarating and hair-raising drives that Ian could ever remember. Scores of hairpin bends, narrow, rough roads, deep drops right beneath them—he enjoyed them all as the yellow car snaked its way up the mountain road. Looking down through the car windows he could see, far below, the road they had used ten minutes before. When a car or coach was coming the other way it was a tight squeeze. Several times the car wheels seemed to be on the point of slipping off the road edge and plunging them a thousand feet down the mountain side.

Ian glanced behind. Smith was pale and sweating, plainly terrified. Now Ian knew why McKimm had suggested this drive. He didn't like Smith any more than Ian did.

Next day, too, was overcast, so another drive was discussed. At last it was settled that they should lunch at Porto Cristo, a small port on the eastern part of the island, and Smith's relief was plain. Ian saw that there would be no mountain roads on this route.

The small bay at Porto Cristo was crowded with the usual array of yachts, and Ian and McKimm spent a happy time walking along the breakwaters and jetties. When they returned to the others Smith explained that in days gone by this had been a very busy port, but now Palma, the island's capital, had taken over in importance.

At about three o'clock in the afternoon old Mr Yates was ready to start back. Ian looked out regretfully through the back window as the delightful little port began to fall away behind them. Then he turned his attention to the road ahead.

It was a few moments later that he saw the sign: a fingerpost with bold black letters painted on it.

"CUERVAS DEL DRACH," it read.

"What does that mean, Smith?" the boy asked.

The secretary looked at the sign.

"That," he announced, "points to the Caves of Drach."

2

"The Spotted Dog."

That was the name of the bar, on the northern outskirts of Paguera, where four young men were sitting having drinks.

They had chosen this particular bar from among many others because it was just like an English pub. It was run by Toni, a small dark Spaniard from Madrid, who had married an English girl. Iris, tall and blonde, came from the East End of London, where she had worked in a pub in Bethnal Green. Toni and Iris had set about creating an exact replica of the place in which she had served so happily.

Around the bar were dozens of photographs of English football teams together with their flags and pennants. There were advertisements for English ales on walls, trays and beer mats. Round polished tables with cast-iron legs added an air of authenticity. Above the bar over which Toni and Iris ruled, there hung hundreds of men's ties—presented by British visitors who had appreciated the homely atmosphere.

Only two of the quartet sitting in the Spotted Dog that evening were British. One was an American, and the fourth was Russian. The bar was full of English people, for this was a natural centre for them, and more than one eyed the four young men curiously. Surely there was something familiar about them. That's it! They were four famous astronauts—Chris Godfrey, Tony Hale, Morrey Kant and Serge Smyslov. Their pictures had appeared frequently in newspapers and on television all over the world. There was some excited whispering among the people in that bar.

Many of them wondered what these four were doing so far away from Cape Canavaral, where they spent most of their time. Actually they were taking a well-earned holiday during a lull in the activities of the United Nations Exploration Agency. U.N.E.X.A. had given them six months' leave of absence, and Majorca had been the first on their list of places to visit.

Oblivious of the interest they were causing, the four astronauts chatted happily together. They had known each other for some years, and their amazing adventures had welded them into a very close team. They were never happy when separated—though this had to happen sometimes. But now they were to have a long holiday together. They intended to forget their work and enjoy every minute of their vacation.

"What shall we do tomorrow?" asked Tony, the mechanic of the quartet.

"Let's visit the Space Communication Station," suggested Chris, but the others vetoed this at once. It would remind them too much of their jobs.

"There's a monastery somewhere on the island where the composer Chopin lived for a time. Shall we go there?" asked Serge.

Tony pulled a face. He knew how interested Serge was in music, but he himself was tone deaf. He said firmly that he wouldn't enjoy the visit at all.

"I guess we ought to visit the artificial pearl factory," Morrey said. "It's the most famous in the world."

"Who wants to look at pearls?" Tony protested. "That would be all right for girls."

"Then let's go to a leather factory," Chris suggested. "Majorca is famous for its leather, too. You might pick up a suede coat or a brief-case."

"I'd look well with either of those, now wouldn't I?"

grinned Tony. "I might even be tempted to buy a handbag."

"All right, misery. Where would you like to go then?" sighed Chris.

"I'd like to go to the Caves of Drach," Tony said at once. "I'm told they're fabulous and they have the biggest underground lake in the world."

"All right, then," Chris said with resignation. "The Caves of Drach it is."

"The word is pronounced 'DRACK'. The CH at the end sounds as in 'chemist'," Smith informed Ian as they were nearing the caves.

Several coach-loads of visitors also seemed to have had the same idea, for the big car park in front of the inevitable souvenir shops held several of the huge vehicles. A finger-post pointed to the building in front of the entrance to the caves. Smith bought four tickets for their admission.

The arrangement was that parties of tourists were admitted every hour. Guides accompanied them into the caves, and they returned to the surface by another entrance, so that there was one-way traffic through the caves. Old Mr Yates's party had to wait less than ten minutes for the next batch of tourists to be led below.

There seemed to be several hundred people in the crowd waiting to file into the caves. Ian shuffled impatiently while he waited for the people in front to move forward. They did so with exasperating slowness, but at last he reached the entrance building and the steps leading underground.

Then his impatience vanished, for he had entered into an incredibly beautiful new world. Skilful electric lighting set off the cave to its best advantage, and he gasped in amazement as they made their way downwards.

Countless many-hued stalactites stretched down from the roof, to be matched by their counterparts reaching up from the floor. The path, with its steel guard-rail, wound its way down through forests of stone. Browns, reds, yellows, greys, with occasional splashes of pure white, glistened in the electric lights. Greens and blue-greens glinted in some of the formations. Many of the stalactites and stalagmites had almost joined up, and would probably do so in a few hundred years. Some had already come together to form noble pillars like those in cathedrals, and countless others looked like "organ pipes" of every possible size. People were whispering in awe, as if in a real cathedral, for the sheer majesty of the place impressed itself on everyone.

Ian would have loved to stroke some of the glistening pillars that skirted the pathway, but every few yards there were notices in Spanish, English, German and French forbidding people to touch the formations. Were they tough or brittle, he wondered. He was tempted to find out, but there were men stationed at intervals to keep a watchful eye on the visitors and to see that the notices were obeyed.

"Look at that, Grandad!" Ian exclaimed.

He was pointing to a strange form of stalactite that looked like a curtain hanging down from the ceiling. A light had been placed behind it showing it to be translucent. Then he heard the sound of trickling water and peered over the guard-rail. Down below he could see a crystal-clear stream running in and out of a jumble of rocks. Then it disappeared to—who knows where?

He saw McKimm looking up at the roof. There seemed to be millions of tiny, waxlike stalactites, no bigger than a knitting needle, hanging above them. Suddenly they entered a huge cavern, and though it was brilliantly lighted, the roof was hidden in shadow.

In front was the underground lake, winding its way to right and left, and then disappearing behind majestic pillars of rock. To the left was the auditorium, an array of tiered benches which could probably seat three or four hundred. The tourists were all taking their places on the benches and looking expectantly towards the lake.

Ian gazed around. It was strange to see so many people gathered together in this vast underground hall. How far were they below ground? He had been too much absorbed to notice how long they had taken to descend.

On the left was another opening. It was unlit, so Ian guessed that it wasn't included in the visitors' route. Then he noticed another thing. There was a steel barrier across the entry and the guards here were not wearing ordinary clothes, like the others. These two were in uniform, and Ian saw that they both had revolvers. Before he could wonder about this, all the lights suddenly went out, and a gasp of expectancy rose from the waiting crowd.

How dark it was—utterly black—not a glimmer of light anywhere. A woman quite close to Ian gave a nervous titter. The lights hadn't failed, had they? How would they ever find their way back to the surface?

He need not have worried. A very faint glimmer of light appeared on their right, coming from across the lake. Gradually the light grew stronger, and then they saw an incredible sight.

A boat, brilliantly lit with hundreds of electric bulbs along its sides, was slowly emerging from behind the rocks. Following were two more boats similarly illuminated, moving over the water in complete silence. In the growing light from the three boats Ian could see a number of dark figures on the leading one. Then the music began.

Softly, sweetly, the sound of a violin came from the first boat. Then an electronic organ joined in, then a flute. The audience gasped at the sheer beauty of the sound effects in that vast underground theatre. No cathedral acoustic could possibly equal the cadences produced by this great subterranean hall.

Ian could see the figure of a rower in each of the boats, but they made no sound. Slowly, the three boats passed in front of the audience and then round another bend in the lake—and so out of sight.

There was a sigh from those hundreds of people, who seemed to have been holding their breath. Then the glow appeared once more, and back glided the boats, while the music still played. At last they slid out of view round the bend from which they had first come.

Scarcely had the last boat rounded the bend and its glow faded away than the lights of the cavern came on, softly at first, picking out the beauty and infinite variety of the rock formations, then more strongly until the whole vast cave was brilliantly illuminated. It had been a moving experience.

The audience began to stand up as the two empty boats came back, this time without their lights. They were rowed up to a small landing-stage, and people began queueing up to take a trip along the lake to a second landing stage before returning to the surface.

Ian's attention was drawn once more to the dark, guarded entrance to the mysterious cave. He would have to pass within ten yards of it as he queued for a boat. As he got nearer he tried to peer down its sombre depths, but the light from the main cavern penetrated for only a few yards. Suddenly he left the queue and went to the rails that barred the entrance.

Immediately the two soldiers sprang to life and one of them poured out a torrent of Spanish. The other grasped Ian's shoulder very firmly and twisted him away from the yawning blackness.

The boy reacted angrily. He wasn't used to being handled like this. But the soldier maintained his grasp and Ian was about to take a kick at his captor when Smith came rushing up. The secretary talked in Spanish with the two soldiers and Ian's shoulder was released. Then Ebenezer joined the group and demanded to know what was happening.

"I wanted to have a peep into that cave and the soldier grabbed me as if I was a criminal," Ian explained indignantly. "Did they think I wanted to steal it?"

"I'm sorry, sir," Smith said, "but it seems that entry to this cave is strictly forbidden. The soldiers have orders to let no one go inside. They were only doing their duty when they prevented Master Ian from getting through the barrier."

"Is that all? Then come on, Ian. It's not worth bothering about," the old man said. "Let's get into the boat."

It was, indeed, their turn to get into one of the boats, which had returned to collect its next load of tourists, so Mr Yates, assisted by McKimm, stepped aboard and was followed by the others.

Not worth bothering about, his grandfather had said. But Ian still felt the grip of the soldier's fingers on his shoulder. Why couldn't he take a look into the wretched cave? He decided he wasn't going to be beaten. He would look into that cave if it was the last thing he did.

The boat was gliding silently over the lake, the oars making scarcely a splash. Yet Ian's attention was no longer held by the fantastic beauty of this underground world, or the magical effects of the concealed lighting. He was smouldering with anger, and his mind was busy making plans to get past those horrible soldiers.

It was overcast and dull next day also. A cool wind was blowing in from the sea, which had a hard, steely look. Occasional scurries of rain kept people off the beaches and left them wandering about hotel lounges. Ian said he would like to walk into the village to look around the shops, and his grandfather, immersed in the previous day's newspapers from America, agreed. As Ian rose to go Smith got up too.

"It's all right, Mr Smith," Ian said quickly. "I'd rather go alone."

The secretary glanced at his employer, but the old man waved Ian off impatiently.

"Oh, let the lad go on his own," he growled. "He isn't a baby, you know."

Ian gave a triumphant grin at Smith's discomfiture and skipped away before his grandfather could change his mind. He wasn't long in the village, for he knew exactly what he wanted. It was a small electric torch and a spare battery.

"When can we go to the Caves of Drach again, Grandad?" he asked at lunch.

"You liked that visit, didn't you, boy? As the weather isn't very nice, would you like to go again this afternoon? Mind you—there's to be no annoying of those soldiers."

Ian felt the torch nestling snugly in his pocket.

"All right, Grandad. I won't disturb the soldiers," he promised.

So it was arranged. Smith had some important work to do for Ebenezer, so McKimm had only Ian and his grandfather as passengers. They arrived at the caves in the early afternoon.

This time Ian paid little attention to the array of stalactites and stalagmites on his way down. Once they entered the subterranean auditorium he made his way over to the far side, near to where the boats would pick up their passengers—and near to the entrance to the forbidden cave.

Again, when everyone was seated, all the lights went out and then came the glow of the silent rowing boats. The orchestra played and the programme of the previous day was repeated. As the boats vanished round the bend and the last strains of music died away, the light gradually came on and everyone relaxed and began to chatter.

"I wonder how these fellows like it who spend half their lives in these caves," Ebenezer said, turning to his grandson. But Ian wasn't there. His seat was vacant.

"Where's the young rascal gone to?" the old man asked McKimm as he stood up and stared around. People were now queueing up for the boats and the return to the surface.

"I can't see him," the billionaire said with a frown. "He hasn't gone on one of the boats already, has he?"

"No, sir. That's the first boatload pulling away from the landing stage now—and he's not on that."

"Then where the blazes is he?"

The two men searched the underground theatre—but there was no Ian. Old Mr Yates became visibly worried and mopped his brow in his anxiety.

"Is there anything the matter, sir?" a young man asked. He was one of a group of four who were waiting for the last boat.

"It's—it's all right," Ebenezer replied. "It's my grandson. He seems to have disappeared."

3

"Disappeared?" Chris asked—for it was he. "But he can't have gone far. What is he like?"

Ebenezer described Ian as best he could, and two of the young men said they would return to the surface to see if by any chance the boy had made his way out of the cave alone. Meanwhile the other two, aided by McKimm and watched anxiously by Mr Yates, began another thorough search of the great underground chamber. It ended in front of the guarded cavern.

"He couldn't have gone in there, could he?" asked Morrey.

The old man became even more agitated.

"He tried to get into there yesterday, but the guards turned him back. I don't see how he could have got past them."

"I'm not so sure," Chris said thoughtfully. "The steel barrier has gaps through which a boy could squeeze. If he slipped through while all the lights were out the guards wouldn't see him."

The old man gave Chris a hard stare.

"You know—you may be right," he said slowly. "He was very put about because he wasn't allowed to go in yesterday. I wonder if that was why he was so keen to come to the caves again today—so that he could slip past the soldiers while the lights were out?"

"Let's see what the men have to say," Morrey suggested.

He went up to the two soldiers and spoke to them in fluent

Spanish. The soldiers replied volubly, and Morrey spoke again with some heat. Then he turned to Chris and the old gentleman.

"The guards say they didn't see the boy enter the cave, but they admit he could have done while the lights were off."

"Then we must search the cave for the young rascal," Mr Yates said firmly. "I'll give him a piece of my mind when we find him."

"I'm afraid it isn't going to be as easy as that, sir. The guards positively refuse to let us go into the cave to search for your grandson."

"But that's ridiculous," Ebenezer spluttered. "The boy may have fallen and injured himself in the dark. Tell them to remove that wretched barrier."

Morrey again spoke to the soldiers, and they drew their revolvers.

"It's no use, sir," Morrey said at last. "They say they have orders to prevent anyone from entering that cave, and they are permitted to use force if necessary."

Ebenezer gave a loud snort. He marched up to the barrier and began to pull at it. One of the soldiers jabbed a gun in his ribs and shouted something in Spanish.

"Come away, sir," Morrey said, going up to the old man and taking his arm. "The soldier says he will have to shoot you if you try to move that barrier."

"But I'm an American citizen. He can't do that," Ebenezer stormed. "Tell the man to let me through."

"He won't, sir. I'll find out who his superior officer is and we'll see him," Morrey said.

Ebenezer flashed an angry glance at the soldiers, but allowed himself to be led away. Then Morrey returned to the guards, who had lowered their revolvers, and spoke to them briefly. One of the men replied sullenly.

"The soldier says that Captain Domingo is in charge of the squad that keeps guard on this cavern," Morrey told the others. "His guard-room is just behind the souvenir shops alongside the car park."

"Right!" snapped Ebenezer. "I'll tell that captain fellow just what I think of him and his wretched soldiers. Oh—er—I don't suppose you could come along, could you?" he asked, turning to Morrey. "My secretary, who speaks the language, isn't here."

"I'll come with pleasure," Morrey answered at once, "and if there's anything else we can do—all four of us—we'd be glad to help."

By this time Tony and Serge had returned from their visit above ground, and no one was surprised when they reported no sign of the boy.

The astronauts could see how upset the old gentleman was at the disappearance of his grandson, and they were also mystified as to why such efforts should be made to prevent anyone from entering that particular cavern. They were on holiday, with nothing special to do. If they could help Mr Yates find Ian, and at the same time solve the mystery of the black cavern, it would add interest to their vacation.

"You stay here, Tony and Serge," Chris said, as the accepted leader of the quartet. "Morrey and I will go and see the Captain."

Mr Yates, McKimm and the two astronauts made their way as quickly as possible back to the surface. Another batch of tourists was about to descend. So even if there was someone lost in the caves the Spanish authorities were not going to forgo the income from entrance fees to the Caves of Drach.

Captain Domingo was lounging in an easy-chair in his guard-room. Two lieutenants were idly reading newspapers. It was a boring job—this guarding of the black cavern. The Captain put down his cigarette as his visitors entered.

"Captain Domingo? We think that a young boy has wandered off into that cave your soldiers are guarding. We want your permission to enter and search for him," Morrey said briskly.

The Captain looked at them sharply. His indolent attitude had gone in a flash. Though he spoke in Spanish, from the emphatic way he was shaking his head they all knew he was refusing permission.

"Doesn't the fool know that my grandson is in there?" shouted Ebenezer. "He may be lying injured. Why doesn't he order his men to let us through?"

The Captain's eyes flashed with anger as he guessed what the old man meant. He spoke sharply to Morrey.

"He says it's a decree of the Government in Madrid that no one should be allowed to enter that particular cave. That is why he and his men are stationed here—to see that the decree is obeyed," Morrey told the others.

"But why?" bellowed Mr Yates. "Why shouldn't we be allowed to go in and look for that young idiot of a grandson of mine? Surely if there's someone lost in the cavern the decree can be bent a bit?"

"It seems not," Morrey sighed. "I put that to him. He says the only thing you can do is to get permission from the Minister of Tourism in Madrid."

"But that could take days," Chris protested. "If Ian's inside and is injured he could—well, he could die." He couldn't help looking at the old man as he spoke.

"So we have to get permission from the Spanish Government, do we?" snapped Ebenezer. "Right! Then I'll wring it out of them. We'll see if the name and power of Ebenezer Yates mean anything. McKimm—back to the hotel at full speed."

By now Morrey had learned from McKimm who his compatriot was, and as they tore back along the road to Paguera he looked at the old man with interest. He was reputed to be one of the richest men in the world, and from the grim set of his face Morrey guessed that he would use all his influence to get into that cavern.

The car squealed to a halt outside the Hotel Beverley Playa, and the billionaire signalled to Chris and Morrey to follow him. He strode to the side entrance leading to his suite with a speed surprising for a man of his age. No sooner had the lift stopped than he bounced out and almost ran along the corridor.

"Smith!" he shouted as he burst into his lounge. "Order Captain Matthews to get the jet ready within thirty minutes. We're going to Madrid!"

The elegant secretary looked startled for a moment, but in a few crisp sentences Ebenezer had put him in the picture. He recovered his composure quickly and reached for the phone.

"I want to thank you young men—and your two friends—for being so helpful," Mr Yates said, turning to Chris and Morrey. "I wonder if you would mind keeping a watch on that cavern while I'm away? Ian might make his own way out and there must be someone there if he does."

"Of course we'll help," Chris replied at once. "We'll gladly do anything we can."

The old man looked keenly at the pair for a few seconds, as if making up his mind.

"I know you and your friends are astronauts," he said at last. "I wonder if I could hire your services? You see, when I get permission to enter that black hole, I'll want someone to go in. I'm not as young as I was. So will you four go and look for my grandson?"

"Willingly, Mr Yates," Chris told him, "and we don't want paying. We're all on leave and our salaries are being paid by U.N.E.X.A."

"Well—we'll see about that later," the old man said gratefully. "I wonder if I could ask you to gather together what equipment you may need, while I'm away in Madrid? You need spare no expense."

"Of course," Morrey assured him. "We'll only need a few powerful lamps. I don't expect Ian can have gone very far."

"We may need a doctor and a stretcher," Chris pointed out, and they saw the old man wince.

"Whatever you say. And charge it up to me. I'll be back tomorrow."

The two astronauts had some doubt about this. They were wondering how the old man would set about applying pressure to the Spanish Government to suspend the decree to allow a search to be made for the missing boy.

"If you wait here till McKimm gets back from the airport, I'll place him at your disposal," Mr Yates said. But the astronauts decided to return to the Caves of Drach without further delay, and Mr Yates arranged for the hotel to hire them a car.

As McKimm shot off in the yellow car with Ebenezer and Smith, Chris and Morrey climbed into a small grey Volvo that the hotel had provided. They stopped at a large electrical goods shop in Palma and bought four of the most powerful electric torches that were available.

Less than twenty minutes later they screeched to a halt in the car park near to Captain Domingo's guard-room. The Captain, still on duty, eyed them warily.

"Has anything been seen of the boy?" Morrey asked, and the Captain replied in the negative. Two more batches of tourists had passed through the caves whilst they had been away, but Ian had still not emerged.

"Captain," Morrey said, "your orders are to prevent anyone entering the cavern, but that doesn't include shining a light down it, does it?"

Domingo looked doubtful. He had learned the identity of these young men during their absence and would have liked to help them. But he had his duty to do. However, he didn't remember anything in his instructions that forbade a light to be shone into the forbidden opening.

"You may use your torches," he said, "but I will come with you."

"Morrey, ask him if it would be possible to close the caves to tourists while we are down," Chris said.

When Morrey translated the suggestion to Domingo the Captain was emphatic. The visitors brought a substantial income to the Island, and the Government would certainly refuse to sacrifice this. However, the last party of the day had just entered, and if the astronauts would be patient for half an hour or so, the caves would be clear.

Chris and Morrey agreed to this and half an hour later they made their way underground, accompanied by Captain Domingo.

"Nothing to report," Serge told them when they met near the underground lake.

"We've kept our eyes glued to that cave," Tony confirmed, "but there's been no sign of him."

"The visitors will be out in a few minutes," Chris said. "The Captain here says he has no objection to our shining a light into the cavern when everyone has gone."

He produced the electric torches he had bought and shared them out among his companions.

"How soon do you think Mr Yates can get permission for us to go and look for Ian?" asked Tony. But no one could say.

Captain Domingo spoke rapidly to Morrey.

"All the visitors seem to have gone," Morrey told the others, "and the Captain says we can now shine our torches into the cavern."

They all moved forward expectantly, and at a word from their officer the two soldiers stood aside. Now they could really peer into the black depths, which seemed very menacing. Would they see Ian? Was he within range of their torches?

Almost together the four switched on, and the four beams probed the blackness of the cavern. They gazed intently, their eyes scanning every nook and cranny. There was no sign of Ian.

"Don't switch off yet," Chris said.

He produced a pair of field glasses and, while Tony held his torch, Chris scanned the inside of the cave minutely.

It was no use. The boy certainly wasn't within range of their beams. If he had gone in at all he must have penetrated quite a distance, for they could see for several hundred yards before the cavern seemed to plunge into darkness beyond their range.

"Let's shout," suggested Tony, and all four yelled "IAN" at the tops of their voices. Then they listened hard for any reply. There was none, though they called several times.

The boy seemed to have been completely swallowed up by the black and sinister cave.

4

It was arranged that Tony and Morrey should remain on watch at the cavern's mouth, while Chris and Serge returned to their apartment for rest and refreshment. Then they would relieve their companions until word came from Mr Yates.

Before they left Chris had an idea. Through Morrey he asked Captain Domingo if he could arrange for the Caves to be closed to visitors next day. It would be difficult to keep watch for Ian if the place was crowded with tourists.

The Captain replied firmly that such a thing was impossible. Many hundreds of thousands of pesetas were taken each day in admissions. This made a large contribution to the Island's economy, and to give it up was unthinkable.

"But I'm sure Mr Yates would make up any losses," Chris said desperately. Was not the life of a young boy worth more than money?

However, the Captain was adamant. Only if Mr Yates could guarantee a sum at least equal to an average day's takings could the matter even be considered. The Caves of Drach would open as usual at ten o'clock next morning unless word came from Madrid.

Chris and Serge felt quite despondent when they drove the Volvo back to Mr Yates's hotel. McKimm was waiting and was only *too* anxious to act as contact man—or anything else that the astronauts could suggest. They told him that they would be going to their apartment for something to eat, but if word came from Mr Yates they were to be told immediately. If they were not in their apartment they would be just down the road at the Spotted Dog, no more than two hundred yards away.

It was Serge who concocted the meal. His companions never ceased to wonder at the varied talents of their Russian friend. He seemed able to produce an appetizing repast from the most ordinary ingredients, always, of course, giving it a most exotic name.

When they had cleared away the two astronauts decided to take their usual stroll down to the Spotted Dog, hoping that the company would cheer them up. Besides—they might discover why entrance to the black cave was so rigidly forbidden.

"Oh, Iris," Chris said casually, "I noticed today that they had an armed guard at the entrance to one of the caverns in the Caves of Drach. Any idea why?"

"It's some silly superstition that—" Iris began. But then Toni, who had joined them, interrupted with a torrent of Spanish. Iris flushed and tossed her head angrily. Without a word she left the astronauts and busied herself behind the bar, serving another customer.

"I am sorry, Chris," Toni apologized, "but Iris and me, we quarrel over the Caves of Drach. She say that the Government decree is silly. I do not agree. So—we quarrel."

"But, Toni, why do they let tourists go everywhere else, and just stop them going into this one small cave?" Chris asked. "Is there any danger of rock-falls?"

"No, Chris. It is not that," replied Toni earnestly. "It is something that we do not usually talk about. But I will tell you, for you and your friends are brave men."

He motioned the two astronauts to go with him to a deserted corner of the bar. There he turned and faced them. Though it was not particularly warm, they saw perspiration on Toni's face.

"That cavern in the Caves of Drach is an evil place," he said, speaking low and earnestly. "Many people have gone inside and never come back. That is why our Government will let no one go inside any more."

"But how can that be?" asked Chris. "It's just a cave like the rest."

For a few seconds Toni was silent, looking most uncomfortable.

"Excuse me, please," he said. "Iris is busy and I must help her at the bar."

"Now what do you make of that?" Chris asked as they walked back to their apartment. "Strange, isn't it?"

"That cave must be—what you call 'spooky'," Serge said seriously.

"Come off it, Serge. You don't believe in ghosts, I know. But why the Spanish Government goes to the expense of setting up a guard-post and mounting a continuous guard beats me."

"I do not understand why people go in and do not come out. Were they not fetched out?"

They talked for some time before snatching a few hours' sleep. Then they phoned McKimm at the hotel, only to learn that there was still no news from Mr Yates. They took the Volvo and drove back to the Caves of Drach to relieve Tony and Morrey.

There were not many lights on in the cave. Black shadows lurked everywhere, and the drip of water sounded monotonously.

"Phew! Am I glad you've come," breathed Tony. "This place is beginning to give me the creeps. Any word from Mr Yates?"

Chris told him that it was too soon to expect that yet, but went on to relate what they had learned at the Spotted Dog.

"Well—so long," grinned Tony as he and Morrey set off for the surface. "Enjoy yourselves."

The hours dragged by. Chris or Serge would periodically shine their torches into the cavern, but all was black, silent and menacing. They saw no sign of Ian at all. Nor did they see any movement. As time passed the soldiers were as glad of the astronauts' company as Chris and Serge were of theirs.

Chris began to look at his watch more frequently. The first batches of visitors were due at ten a.m., in two hours' time. Even if Mr Yates obtained permission for them to enter the cave, it would be impossible to organize a proper search with crowds of tourists everywhere.

At nine o'clock a breathless Tony came hurrying back into the Caves. He wasn't due for another hour, so his coming was a welcome surprise.

"Mr Yates will be back at one-thirty," he said in a rush. "He wants to see us all at his hotel. McKimm received the message half an hour ago, and he's brought me along to tell you."

"So we'll soon know if Mr Yates has succeeded or not," breathed Chris. "I wonder if one of us ought to stay here."

"Let's see what Captain Domingo says," suggested Serge. "Maybe his soldiers will help keep watch for us."

They waved goodbye to the two guards now on duty, and the guards waved back. It had been good to have the company of the young men in those gloomy depths.

The yellow car was in the park with the faithful McKimm beside it.

"They're closing the caves," the chauffeur burst out, pointing to a poster that a man was fixing to one of the pay-boxes. In the usual four languages it announced that the Caves of Drach would be closed to the public until further notice.

They rushed into the guard-room, where Captain Domingo had just come on duty. Morrey was already talking to him.

"What's happened?" asked Chris. "Why are they closing the caves?"

"The Captain doesn't know," Morrey told him. "He says he's just had orders from Madrid. The Caves are to be barred to visitors until he hears further."

"Mr Yates!" exclaimed Tony. "It must be because of him!"

"Perhaps he's got permission for us to explore that cavern after all," ventured Serge.

Morrey spoke to the Captain, who nodded his head and said something in reply.

"He'll watch out for Ian while we are away," he assured his friends. "So let's be off, shall we?"

"By the way, where's the Volvo?" asked Chris.

"We left it at our apartment," Morrey explained. "McKimm insisted that we'd get here more quickly if we let him bring us in his yellow peril."

"I ken this road like the back o' ma hand," the chauffeur confirmed. "I'll knock ten minutes off you laddies' time."

He did, too. Almost before they knew it they were back at Mr Yates's hotel.

"Here's the key to Mr Yates's suite," McKimm said, handing it over to Chris. "You'll wait for the old gentleman there?"

"Very well," Chris agreed. "I'll bet the old chap will be dead tired when he gets back."

McKimm left them to go to the airport. If the jet touched down on time he would have more than two hours to wait before picking up his passengers. But knowing how Captain Matthews could handle that piece of machinery and how anxious his employer would be to get back, the chauffeur thought it best to be at Palma Airport very early.

"Let's have a coffee—and perhaps a few biscuits," Tony suggested as they settled down to wait for the return of the billionaire. With a sigh of resignation at his friend's perpetual appetite Chris went to the phone to give the order.

Over their drinks and nibbles Chris and Serge told the others what they had learned from Toni about the sinister reputation of the cavern, and how unwilling he seemed to be to discuss it.

"My guess is that the Government is revenue-conscious and discourages talk about it," suggested Morrey. "If the Caves of Drach gained a bad reputation the thousands of people who now visit it every day might be scared away."

"But how is it, I wonder, that so many people have entered the cave but none returned," mused Serge. "Is it true or is it a legend?"

"If it's true, why don't they seal the entrance completely, or even blast it in?" Tony asked.

"I think I can answer that one," Chris replied thoughtfully. "Did any of you notice—as I did—that there seemed to be a gentle current of air coming from the cave?"

They all nodded, and Chris went on.

"You see, if they sealed the entrance to that cavern they would seriously affect the ventilation of the caves. With so many people underground at any time, this would be disastrous. Without the air constantly blowing in from the cavern the authorities would have to install and maintain an expensive ventilation system, such as is used in mines."

"So they find it cheaper to use an open barrier and to keep it guarded than to seal it off?" asked Tony, and this seemed a logical conclusion.

They went on to discuss plans for searching for Ian if Mr Yates's mission had been successful. Would Captain Domingo or any of his men go with them into the cavern? If not, ought they to take arms with them?

"I don't think we shall find any fearsome beasties," laughed Chris, "but I'll tell you what. I think we might take our light-weight space-suits. Then we will have our blasters with us."

He was referring to the space-suits they wore when training on Earth. Because of Earth's gravity the suits had to be much lighter than those used for lunar or Martian exploration. The

Moon has a gravity force of only one-sixth of that on Earth, while the Martian pull is only one-third as strong as ours, so astronauts can wear much heavier suits under those conditions than they possibly could under terrestrial gravity.

"But why should we need our suits?" asked Serge, puzzled.

"Only if we meet pockets of gas—you know, methane or something. Also in case it starts to get warm down there," replied Chris.

The others agreed, so Chris again picked up the phone in Mr Yates's lounge. He put through a call to Farnborough in England, where the astronauts had done much of their training. This was the nearest place where space-suits that fitted them were kept in store. Space-suits have to be individually tailored, for the tall and broad Morrey Kant would need a very different size from one that would fit Serge's slight figure.

Farnborough said they would pack the suits and all their equipment at once. But how were they to be transported?

"Another job for Captain Matthews," grinned Tony as Chris continued speaking on the phone.

When he'd finished they turned to discussing how they would enter the cave. Tony was for all four of them marching in in a body, but Serge was more cautious. He thought that one should enter first and the others follow at intervals.

It was Morrey's compromise suggestion that was adopted. All four would enter the cave together and stay together as long as they could see the entrance. Then two of them would go on some distance ahead and call the others forward if all was well.

"Aren't we being a bit timid?" protested Tony. "We've said we don't think there are any beasties in the cavern. I shouldn't think there are any ghosts, either!"

"But if the reports that so many people have disappeared are true, we must take precautions," Chris reminded him.

"What about communications?" asked Serge. "We ought to maintain contact with someone at the entrance."

"That will be difficult," said Tony, the acknowledged expert. "Even the best ultra-short-wave set would have a range of only half a mile through that rock. Beyond that the only sure way is by field telephone."

"Then if we have to go in more than half a mile we'll see if Captain Domingo can fix us up with a phone," Chris suggested.

They continued to discuss their forthcoming venture until Morrey, who happened to be looking out of the window, saw the yellow car shudder to a halt in the car park far below.

"They're back," he called to the others, and his companions joined him at the window.

Thirty seconds later the lounge door opened and Mr Yates, supported by Smith and McKimm, staggered into the room. The astronauts were shocked at his drawn, haggard face. It was plain that he was almost dead with weariness, and they wondered if he'd had any sleep since he'd left. They went forward solicitously, but he waved them back and sank into an arm-chair, struggling to collect himself.

"I'm glad you young men are all here," he gasped. "Now, Smith, you tell them what's happened."

The old man lay back and closed his eyes while the secretary gave an account of what had occurred in Madrid. By threatening to close half the hotels on the Island, and many on the mainland, Mr Yates had compelled the Minister of Tourism to listen to him, but it was only when he threatened that his banks would call in their loans to Spain that the Minister finally capitulated.

However, he insisted that Mr Yates should accept full responsibility for anything that might happen and guarantee to pay adequate compensation. A short document was drawn up and Mr Yates and the Minister signed it. Now the astronauts were free to enter the cavern. An Army Major had accompanied Mr Yates from Madrid to give fresh orders to Captain Domingo.

"They closed the caves to the public this morning," Tony said. "Did you have anything to do with that?"

Smith permitted himself a superior smile.

"Oh, yes," he said. "Mr Yates has bought the Caves of Drach."

"So now there's nothing to stop us going in after Ian, is there?" Chris said. "Let's get organized right away."

"Stop!"

They turned to the old man, who, they thought, had been asleep. Mr Yates was sitting bolt upright in his chair, his face working strangely.

"You—you are not going into that cave," he gasped.

5

There was silence in the lounge. Every eye was turned on Ebenezer Yates.

"What did you say, sir?" Chris asked in amazement. "You don't wish us to go and look for your grandson?"

"I do not," Ebenezer answered firmly. "You see, I've been giving all this a great deal of thought during the flight from Madrid. Here—" he pulled a sheet of paper from his pocket and handed it to Chris—"is a dossier on the cavern. Read it, and you'll see that it records more than fifty disappearances. No one has ever returned, not even an experienced cave-exploration team who were the last to go in, over seven years ago."

Chris took the paper, which was a typewritten list of dates and names.

"Since then the cavern has been closed," Mr Yates went on. He paused and mopped his face. "If—if Ian has been swallowed up by that hell-hole, I'm not going to sacrifice four lives in an attempt to save one."

He sank back in his chair, while the others looked on anxiously. Smith hurried to his side with a glass of brandy.

"Drink this, sir, and get some rest."

The old man took a sip and seemed to revive somewhat.

"I know I asked you young men to go and search for my grandson," he said weakly, "but now I've got the ban lifted I've had second thoughts about the whole thing. I would never forgive myself if you four became the cavern's latest victims."

"But we may be able to get Ian back," Tony burst out. "He can't have gone very far."

Mr Yates shook his head and tears began to stream down his face.

"He's been in there for more than twenty-four hours," he said. "If he were still alive he would have found his way out by now. No. I can't let you go in."

Chris looked round at his companions. He knew exactly how they felt.

"Go and get some rest, sir," he said. "We'll talk about this again when you've had some sleep."

Ebenezer allowed himself to be conducted from the lounge by his secretary and his chauffeur. No sooner had the door closed behind them than the others turned to Chris, but he held up his hand to silence them.

"We're going into that cavern," he said simply. There was no need for the other three to say a thing. They agreed so utterly with Chris's decision.

A moment later Smith came back into the lounge.

"I want to thank you young gentlemen for your offer of help," he began. "I'm only sorry it has ended this way. I——"

"Mr Smith," Chris said speaking deliberately, "in spite of what Mr Yates has said, we are going into that cavern."

"But he's requested you not to," spluttered the secretary.

"We know," Chris answered, "and we're sorry to disobey him. But our minds are made up and nothing is going to stop us. Now, Mr Smith, will you help us or not?"

"What can I do? If I condone what you are going to do, Mr Yates will be very angry with me."

"Put the blame on us," Chris said easily. "We want you to order the jet to London Airport to collect our light space-suits. I've been on the phone about them already."

"I can't do it," Smith protested.

"Oh yes you can," Tony butted in. "Anyone would think you're afraid for your job, or that we were asking you to come into the cave with us. Don't you want us to try and save Ian, Mr Smith?"

"Of course I do. But you heard what Mr Yates said."

"I didn't hear him say the jet was to be grounded," grinned Tony. "Come on, Mr Smith. Just do that for us."

The secretary paused uncertainly. It was true that the old man had given no orders about the plane.

"Very well," he said at last, "but I disclaim all responsibility for the outcome."

McKimm came in at that moment.

"He's out like a light," the chauffeur said. "He'll sleep all round the clock."

"So much the better," laughed Chris. "You see, Mr McKimm, in spite of what Mr Yates said—we're going into that cave."

The chauffeur looked startled for a moment, and then his face lit up.

"Good forr you, Mr Godfrey. Can I do anything?" he asked.

"Yes. Get Captain Matthews here as quickly as possible. I want to send him off to London."

The next few hours were filled with activity. While the old man slumbered on peacefully things were beginning to hum. The jet plane streaked through the skies to collect space-suits and powerful radio telephones. The four astronauts were introduced to Major Carberra, the Spanish officer who had been sent by his Government to observe the whole operation. The Major, who spoke English, had ordered Captain Domingo and his men to give the explorers every assistance short of entering the cave themselves.

A field telephone, with several miles of cable on a drum, was produced from Army stores. First-aid equipment and a special stretcher used in rescuing pot-holers were conjured up by Smith. A young local doctor was recruited to wait at the entrance to the cavern in case his services should be needed.

The tour operators were annoyed that the popular Caves of Drach should be closed to the public, but an announcement in the *Majorca Bulletin* declared that this had been done to facilitate further exploration. Which, Chris supposed, was strictly true.

While waiting for Captain Matthews and Lieutenant Brown to return with their precious cargo, the astronauts took as much rest as they could, for they didn't know what might face them in their search for Ian.

When news came through that the jet was circling Palma Airport, Major Carberra ordered an Army truck to meet it. Smith peeped in at Mr Yates, who still slept on. McKimm roused the astronauts, and within the hour all was ready in the great underground auditorium. Chris, Morrey, Tony and Serge were dressed in their space-suits, ready to enter the fearful cavern from which no one had ever returned.

Almost ceremoniously Captain Domingo threw open the steel barrier. Watched by McKimm—Smith had felt that he had to stay with his employer—the doctor, the officers and about a dozen soldiers, Chris took the first step into the dense blackness.

All four astronauts were wearing their space-suits, the helmets hanging from their chests. Chris had insisted on the suits being worn, for he still thought that the people who had not returned might have been overcome by gas. At the first sign of its presence they would whip on their helmets and use oxygen from the bottles strapped on their backs.

Chris was followed closely by Serge, and then came Morrey and Tony. These two carried a large drum of telephone cable, the end of which was attached to an instrument in the Major's charge. A special fitting in the hub of the drum was connected to the phone carried by the astronauts and this enabled Chris to send back reports as they moved forward. Earphones were clipped to his head, while the microphone hung round his neck, leaving both hands free.

All four paused just inside the cave. What had become of the people who had entered before them? In spite of himself Tony gave a shiver.

With the beam of Serge's torch probing the blackness, the little party began to move cautiously forward. They walked slowly, for the cable drum was heavy and there were loose boulders littering the floor. Tony was watching the cable as it unwound from the drum.

"Stop!" he called.

A little tag, fixed to the cable itself, indicated that fifty metres had been paid out. They had arranged to pause at this point so that Serge could relieve Tony. As they lowered the drum for the change-over Tony glanced back. He could still see in the distance the entrance through which they had come and a little knot of people were peering in from the lighted auditorium. He flashed his torch back to them in greeting.

"Fifty metres," Chris reported into his microphone. "We are travelling in a south-westerly direction. There are quite a large number of fallen boulders on the floor, up to a foot in diameter. The slope downwards is ten degrees."

Major Carberra's slightly anxious voice came back inquiring if they were all right, and Chris assured him that all was well.

"What is your temperature?" asked the officer.

Serge glanced at the watch-like thermometer he wore on his wrist.

"Sixteen degrees Centigrade," he reported, and Chris repeated the figure over the telephone. He knew that all their reports were being recorded.

"I don't think we shall need our helmets," observed Tony as they resumed their march. "The air is nice and fresh."

It was true. The gentle breeze that always seemed to be blowing from the depths of the cavern was pleasant and refreshing. The astronauts found it quite invigorating to breathe.

But where did it come from? Chris puzzled over the problem. The gentle current of air was quite steady, and this is very unusual in a cave, where the air is generally stagnant and dank. This was a delight to breathe. Surely the cave must have another opening to the surface. The air, channelled along it, must somehow acquire this exhilarating quality.

As they strode along the front pair kept a sharp lookout for any sign of Ian. Once they thought they saw a body lying curled up on the floor, but it turned out to be a large boulder. There was no sign of the boy, or of the many people who had disappeared before him.

"One hundred metres!"

The explorers paused to change over the drum. This time Chris fell behind to let Morrey join Tony in the lead.

"Nineteen degrees Centigrade," they reported. "Slope twelve degrees. Direction west-south-west by west."

So—the temperature had risen slightly, and the downward slope had increased. Their direction, too, had changed. Without their noticing it, the cavern had curved. When they looked back the entrance was no longer visible. However, they could still talk with the Major, and this link with the outside world was reassuring.

Several times more they stopped for the change-over and the report. When they were five hundred metres from the entrance they took their planned rest. Though the cable drum was getting lighter with every metre they went forward, it was still quite heavy and they were glad of the pause.

"Temperature twenty degrees. Slope still twelve degrees. Direction due west," Chris reported. Major Carberra was still on the other end of the line and he had some interesting news for them. The boy's grandfather had arrived at the Caves and wanted to speak to them.

"That's torn it," grinned Tony. "I'll bet the old boy is furious."

Ebenezer had awakened some ninety minutes before and had asked to see the astronauts. Smith had been compelled to tell him that they had decided to go ahead with their exploration of the cavern. He explained apologetically that he'd been persuaded to send Captain Matthews to Britain to collect some equipment for the four young men.

Mr Yates waved his excuses aside.

"Get McKimm here at once," he bawled. "I'm going to stop them."

"Er—McKimm is at the Caves of Drach," Smith explained uncomfortably. "He took the four of them there."

"Then get me a taxi," roared Ebenezer, levering himself out of bed and looking for his clothes. "I must reach them before they go into that gateway to Hell."

He was too late. When he reached the underground auditorium the knot of people peering into the cavern told him that the exploration had begun. He heard the Army Major speaking on the telephone. At his urgent request Major Carberra handed the instrument over.

"Listen carefully," said Ebenezer, speaking slowly into the telephone. "You must return at once. I will not allow you to risk your lives any further. If my grandson is dead, then so be it. But it will be on my conscience for the rest of my days if harm befalls you four young men. Please turn back before it is too late."

It was Chris's voice that answered the old man.

"Mr Yates," he said, "I'm speaking for all of us. We appreciate your concern for us, but we're determined to go on. We've seen no sign of Ian yet, so we're going on until we do. There's no sign of danger of any kind—or of anything unusual."

"But don't you understand?" Mr Yates said with growing agitation, "I came back from Madrid with the dossier of this dreadful place. No one—I repeat, no one—has ever come out. I beg you to turn round and please an old man by returning to safety."

It was fully a minute before a reply came over the wire. It seemed that Chris was discussing Ebenezer's appeal with the others.

"No, sir," he said at last. "I'm sorry we can't do what you say. If there's something strange in this cave we're going to face it and find out what it is."

"But the risk!" Ebenezer exploded.

He heard Chris chuckle over the phone.

"That's all right, Mr Yates," the astronaut said. "We thrive on risks and—well, we've faced quite a few in the past."

"So you won't come back?"

"No, sir. We're going on. But I'll promise you this. We will return if we think it advisable. Goodbye, Mr Yates."

6

The explorers plodded on, taking it in turns to carry the drum of cable. At frequent intervals they paused to report their position and the conditions they found. A map of the cave—the first ever—was being drawn from the information they sent back. So far the temperature had risen only to twenty-two degrees Centigrade. The slope downwards continued about the same, though they changed direction several times.

"I don't know what all the worry is about," laughed Tony. "I feel good."

So did the others. Their conversation was lighthearted, even gay. They took deep breaths of the pleasant current of air blowing gently in their faces.

"I've seen adverts for a well-known seaside resort saying that the air was 'like wine'," declared Tony. "An advert for this would say it was like champagne." He began to sing tunelessly. Before long all four were singing or whistling gaily.

"They seem in very good spirits," Major Carberra told Mr Yates, who had insisted on staying at the officer's side. "They are all singing!"

"Maybe it's to keep up their courage," suggested Ebenezer.

"No, I don't think that is why," the Major said, listening intently. "They seem to be—well, enjoying the experience."

The floor of the cavern was now completely free from fallen rocks, and the drum was getting lighter. So the four astronauts were making good progress. At least they should have been, but they would stop quite frequently to laugh uproariously at some silly joke or wisecrack. Then they would resume their march, singing happily. Once or twice they forgot to report back to the Major.

By now they had walked over three miles from the cavern's mouth. Soon the cable on the drum would come to an end. They had planned that when this happened one of them would stay behind with the radio receiver so that he could still pick up reports from the others, who would have gone ahead, and relay them back over the wire. When radio reception was no longer possible further reporting would have to be abandoned and the four astronauts would join up again.

It was as they were about to come to the end of the cable that the beam of Serge's torch picked up an object lying on the smooth floor of the cave. For a moment the laughter and joking ceased as the astronauts stared at it.

Serge went forward to see what he'd discovered. It was a torch battery which someone had recently thrown away. Was it Ian's?

For some reason the discovery of the spent battery seemed hilarious to the astronauts. Morrey bellowed with mirth and the others laughed until the tears were streaming down their cheeks.

"What has happened? Why are you laughing so much?" the voice of Major Carberra asked in Tony's earphones.

The Major's question made Tony laugh more than ever. It was only with a great effort that he managed to control himself sufficiently to report that they had found a spent torch battery.

"I do not understand," the Major said testily to Mr Yates. "Your friends have found a torch battery and they think it is very funny. They could hardly tell me for laughing."

Ebenezer was puzzled. What was so humorous about a battery? It had probably been left by his grandson. This evidence that the boy had recently passed through the cavern should have alerted the astronauts to look out for him. Instead they seemed now to be treating the whole affair as a great joke. Suddenly he was furious. "Here, let me have the phone," he snarled. The Major handed it over to him.

"Now look here," the old man barked, "if that battery was Ian's, there's no need to be like a lot of giggling children over it. Are you all drunk?"

He waited for a reply but he didn't get one. All he could hear were shouts and laughter.

But Chris had heard the old man's angry question, and something stirred in his mind. Drunk? Why should Mr Yates accuse him of being drunk? He shook his head and tried to collect his thoughts, but the noise of his three friends made it difficult. Drunk? Intoxicated? Why, the only intoxicating thing was this lovely breeze, this. . . .

This breeze! This air in the cavern! He forced himself to think. Could it be that the air they were breathing, this delightfully fresh air, was making them all lightheaded? There was only one way to find out. To the utter amazement of his companions Chris stopped and began to fumble with his space-helmet. In spite of the uproarious mirth of the others he managed to clip it into position and connect the oxygen tube. The next second, cool, clean oxygen was hissing gently into his helmet.

At first Chris felt dizzy. Then his head cleared as he gulped the oxygen, and as his thoughts became more rational he knew the truth. There was something in the air of the cavern that was acting like a drug, intoxicating them and giving them such a feeling of well-being that they wanted to go on and on.

Was this an important clue? Had he discovered why none of the people who had entered the cavern had ever returned? Was it because, having breathed its subtly drugged air, they had no wish to return but only to press on to ever greater depths?

He looked at the others. Now there seemed something sinister in their hilarious behaviour. Chris could see what a spectacle they were making of themselves—just as he had himself until he put on his space-helmet. He must get the others to put theirs on too.

But it wasn't going to be easy. He pointed urgently to his own helmet and to theirs. Once his own helmet was in position he could talk to his friends only over their helmet radios. Tony, Morrey and Serge all roared with laughter at his gestures. All they seemed to care about was pressing on down into the cavern depths.

Chris tried desperately to convey to them the need to put on their helmets, but it was no use. They could not, or would not, understand. With elaborate signs they indicated that they were going on down, and Morrey and Serge staggered off. Tony stumbled as he started to follow.

Chris made up his mind, and struck Tony under the chin with all his force. A blank expression came over Tony's face and he slumped, unconscious, on to the cavern floor. Chris prayed that the other two wouldn't turn back.

They didn't. Serge and Morrey stumbled on like the drunken men they were, not knowing—or not caring—what was happening to their companion. Chris bent over Tony, and with some difficulty pulled on his helmet. He made sure it was tightly sealed, switched on the oxygen supply, and watched the unconscious Tony anxiously.

Chris had never struck any of his friends before, and he hoped desperately that Tony would understand what had driven him to do so now.

"Hello, Tony. Wake up, old chap," he kept calling urgently over his radio. He knew his voice would be sounding in his friend's helmet. Perhaps it would help to bring him back to his senses just a little more quickly.

A sigh sounded over the radio in reply. As Chris watched, Tony opened his eyes, but they had a blank expression.

"Tony, can you hear me?" Chris repeated. "I've had to put your helmet on. The atmosphere in this cavern is poisoned. Can you hear me?"

Gradually Tony's eyes focused, and Chris repeated his question. Tony struggled to rise, but Chris pushed him back gently.

"Thank God you've come round," he said. "I realized just in time that we were all acting like drunken men. It could only be the air we were breathing. You'll feel better when you've got some oxygen down you."

"My—my head's sore," was Tony's reply.

"I know," Chris said. "I'm sorry, old chap, but I had to knock you out to get your helmet on. It was the only way."

Then Tony did sit up.

"Tell me what's happened," he demanded.

Chris explained rapidly. "So I had to clout you one," he ended with a rueful grin. "Hope I didn't hit you too hard."

"Hard enough," Tony's reply came back. "Yes, I can see what you mean about the effects of the air in the cavern. I feel different now. But what about the others, Chris? What about Serge and Morrey?"

"I know. That's what is worrying me. You wouldn't put on your helmet, so I don't expect they will either. We'll have to knock them out as I did you."

"It won't be easy," Tony said as they prepared to resume their march. "Morrey is a big fellow and it may take some doing. Suppose he hits back?"

"That's a risk we'll have to take. Unfortunately we have no weapons—except our torches. Our blasters would be a little too drastic."

"The torches should be good enough, though we may smash them in the process. Let's get going."

They no longer needed to carry the drum. There was little cable left on it, and in any case they could not speak into the field telephone without removing their helmets. Tony solved the problem by quickly removing his own helmet, squeezing the microphone into it and then putting it on again. He found it very uncomfortable, but it did enable him to get a final message back to the cavern mouth.

"Hale reporting," he called back to Major Carberra. "We've found out that the atmosphere in this cave is highly intoxicating. Godfrey and I are now wearing our helmets, so we've recovered from the effects. We're going on to catch up the others and—er—persuade them to wear theirs. Then we shall carry on with the search."

Chris nodded his approval, for he'd been able to hear Tony's words over his own radio. They must certainly go on after they had "persuaded" Morrey and Serge to put on their helmets. The discovery they had made—that the air in the cave had such a strange mental effect—was clearly very important. It could explain why people, once breathing it, had no wish to return, but were lured ever deeper to . . . what? No explorers before had worn space-helmets with their own pure atmosphere. What a fortunate decision it had been to bring their light-weight suits along!

At the entrance to the cavern Major Carberra passed on Tony's report to the little crowd of waiting people. There was general astonishment at the discovery.

"And I thought they were all drunk!" Mr Yates exclaimed contritely. "They certainly sounded like it."

"There will be no further messages," the Major declared. "They have come to the end of the cable, and they are going ahead. No doubt if they discover anything more they will return to the telephone and report."

This was, in fact, what Chris and Tony had decided to do. With another quick movement Tony took off his helmet, and holding his breath, removed the telephone and re-sealed his headgear.

"It was tempting to take another whiff," he laughed to Chris over their radios.

"Then I should have been forced to give you another biff," Chris answered more seriously.

No longer encumbered with the cable drum, the two were able to make good progress. They were anxious to catch up with their companions and, by whatever means necessary, get their helmets on to them. Only then could they think about looking further for Ian.

Fortunately the cavern floor had become very smooth. So, for that matter, had the walls. But they were still too concerned about Morrey and Serge to pay much attention to the significance of this. All they wanted was to get oxygen into the lungs of their friends and bring them back to their senses.

Because of their headgear Chris and Tony couldn't hear any noise that might indicate that they were catching up with the other two. They could only peer ahead to see if they could catch a glimpse of their friends' torches.

"There they are," Tony called a few minutes later.

He'd seen a flicker of light in the distance that could only have come from Morrey and Serge. They quickened their pace. Soon, in the glimmer from the beam of a torch, they saw the figures of their friends, staggering on unsteadily. They couldn't hear a sound, but they could see that the two ahead were acting in a characteristically drunken fashion. It would be impossible to reason with them.

"Put out your torch," Chris told Tony, and the two hurried forward, guided by the wavering light ahead.

"You take Serge. I'll take Morrey. Don't hit too hard," Chris said.

Now less than twenty yards separated them. Those behind could see that only Serge held a lighted torch. Though Morrey still clung to his, it seemed to be exhausted or damaged. Steeling themselves for the assault, Chris and Tony rushed forward the last few yards. Before Serge and Morrey were aware of their presence their pursuers had struck them down.

What happened in the next few moments was very confused. In hitting their friends Chris and Tony smashed their torches. Serge's torch rolled from his hand but fortunately remained alight. In the dim illumination from this one source Chris and Tony struggled to get helmets on their unconscious friends. Then they sat back, breathing heavily from their efforts, and waited for the oxygen to take effect.

7

The time seemed endless before Morrey, and then Serge, returned to consciousness, but at last both of them sat up. Tony and Chris knelt beside them solicitously, and heard their exclamations as they found themselves wearing helmets.

"All right, are you?" Chris asked cheerfully. "Take it easy. Get some of that oxygen into your lungs and I'll explain what's happened."

"I certainly feel different," admitted Morrey, when Chris had finished, "but I don't know whether I prefer this or how I felt before. I felt good—as I remember."

"That's the trouble," Chris said urgently. "If this air had such an effect on us, it must have had the same on young Ian, and all the other people who came down here over the years. And remember—none of them wore space-suits as we do."

"So you think it's some strange property of the cave's atmosphere that has lured people into its depths?" asked Morrey. Chris agreed that that just about summed it up.

"If you are right we must be careful not to exhaust our oxygen supplies," Serge said gravely. "We must return to the auditorium before that happens."

They stopped to check. With the spare bottle of gas that each carried they judged that their supplies would last just under twelve hours. Allowing for the time it would take for them to return from the point they had already reached they agreed that it would not be safe to continue their advance for longer than another five hours.

They debated whether they should return to the phone and ask Major Carberra to send in further oxygen supplies. But they doubted whether he would agree, so they decided to press on.

"We may find Ian long before we have to turn back," Tony pointed out. "I don't think it will be any use looking for anyone else. They've been in here for years—they'll all be skeletons by now. Ugh!"

"Our main problem is going to be light," Serge pointed out. "We have only one good torch left since Chris and Tony—er—found another use for them."

"What happened to the fourth torch?" Chris asked.

"I guess I must have bashed it somehow," Morrey admitted. "Anyhow—all the batteries should be O.K."

If they used all the batteries from the damaged torches they would have ample power to give them light for as long as they were likely to stay in the cave. But they would have to be extremely careful with their one remaining source of illumination.

"I don't fancy groping my way back if this torch packs up," Tony remarked as they pressed on steadily.

"If that happened the main danger would be that it would take us much longer to get out," said Chris. "We would only be able to find our way back very slowly."

They were all silent as they thought of what might happen if this one precious beam of light was extinguished.

"I wonder how it would feel," mused Tony. "I wonder how we should grope our way along?"

"You can always find out if you like," Chris laughed, for it was he who was holding the precious torch.

"Go on. Switch it off, Chris," Morrey laughed. "Perhaps Tony's scared."

Tony protested indignantly at the suggestion, so he had no option but to support the request that they should switch off for a moment to feel what it would be like in utter darkness.

"What do you say, Serge?" Chris asked. "Do you agree if we switch off for a few minutes?"

"As you please," the Russian said indifferently, "but I suggest we remain still if you do. We do not want to risk anyone colliding with you and smashing our last torch."

"Very well. Stand still, everyone," Chris called cheerfully over the radio. The next second he had cut off the light and they were in complete darkness.

But were they? To everyone's astonishment they found that they could just see each other's outlines.

"Our eyes must have become more sensitive," Morrey suggested when they had got over their first surprise.

But this explanation didn't satisfy the others. No matter how sensitive their eyes might become they couldn't pick up light when there was none. They were too many miles underground.

Tony reminded them that cameras and other special instruments could "see" in the dark. It was possible to photograph any object in complete darkness, using only the heat it radiated.

"But the human eye cannot do this," Serge pointed out unnecessarily. "There must be light coming from somewhere."

"I can see ahead," Tony called. "Is the light coming from farther down in the cavern?"

They all looked down the slope in front of them. Instead of the Stygian blackness they had expected the cavern was faintly illuminated, sufficiently to let them walk along without colliding with each other.

"Phosphoresence!" gasped Chris. "It can only be that. There must be some kind of luminous rock down here."

"How can that be?" asked Serge. "The rock down here has been shut away from all light for millions of years."

They knew he was referring to the ability of some substances to absorb light and then to emit it, later, in the dark. That couldn't be the case here. Nor could they think of any reason why the darkness was not as intense as they had expected it to be. It was too fantastic even to wonder whether there might be a source of light in the cavern itself.

But as they trudged on they had to accept this fantasy. After another few hundred yards the light had increased to such an extent that they were able to put out the torch. Most of the illumination seemed to be coming from the cave ahead, but Chris wasn't at all sure that some of it wasn't from the cavern's walls.

To be able to see so clearly in the depths of the Earth was rather frightening. It could only be the result of some strange phenomenon that none of them had met before.

"It's—ghostly!" Tony breathed.

"We must try to discover the source," Chris declared. "Maybe we should take some rock samples back with us."

"Yes, but our main task is to look for the boy," Serge reminded them. "We must pay this cave another visit after we have found him."

What the Russian had said made sound sense. Because of their limited oxygen supply they must not be diverted from their search for Ian. How far into the cavern the boy could have gone was anybody's guess, but he wouldn't have needed his torch from now on.

As if in confirmation of this the explorers found the torch. It was lying on the smooth floor of the cave and was easily seen. It still gave out a slight glimmer when switched on, but it was obvious that its owner had no further use for it and had thrown it away.

"We'll pick it up on the way back," Tony said, replacing the torch on the ground.

They were becoming eager to explore the mysterious Caves of Drach. If they could only find Ian, why shouldn't they devote the rest of their vacation to this fascinating occupation?

However, it was going to be quite a burden to carry their own atmosphere with them each time they entered the cave. If they could somehow take a sample of the cavern air back with them to the surface perhaps it could be analysed and a mask devised to filter out the drugging element. Then they could spend unlimited time on their exploration.

"Except that we couldn't eat," Tony pointed out.

That would certainly be a difficulty. If they removed their helmets or masks to take food, the strange atmosphere would intoxicate them again.

"We could use something similar to our long-spell helmets," suggested Serge. He was referring to the specially designed headgear for use over an extended period. Tubes leading into the helmet could be connected to a supply of the semi-liquid food that had been developed for such circumstances. It provided both food and drink, but it wasn't very exciting. Tony grimaced at the thought of it.

The light was increasing steadily as they pushed on. They could see each other and their surroundings quite well. Suddenly Serge stopped and stared intently at the cavern walls.

"Look," he said.

Chris and Morrey saw at once what had struck their friend, but Tony didn't.

"What's the matter?" he demanded over the radio.

"This cavern! It isn't a cavern any more," Serge explained. "It's a tunnel!"

"A tunnel?" asked Tony. Then he, too, saw what the other three had noticed.

In the growing light they could see that their surroundings were no longer rough and natural. The walls, floor and ceiling were smooth—even polished.

They stopped in astonishment at this discovery and its implications.

"Why—someone must have cut this!" Tony exploded.

"Exactly," Serge agreed. "This is no longer a natural cavern, but an artificial tunnel."

"I don't understand," Tony confessed. "Why should anyone want to cut a tunnel this deep into the Earth? And why weren't we told about it? They must have known about it on the surface."

There was a long and strained silence as they tried to get used to the new situation. Firstly, there was the strange light from some unknown source. Now there was evidence that the tunnel walls had been cut through the rock in a way that had left them smooth and shining.

"I don't think they did know about it on the surface," Chris said at last. "You see, no one has ever gone back before to tell of this Inside World."

"Inside World? What are you saying?" Morrey burst out.

"I don't think I know what I'm saying," Chris admitted. "But whoever cut this tunnel must have done so with very advanced equipment. From the glazed and shining surfaces it looks as if it must have been cut with a laser beam. We are only just now beginning to use that technique on the surface."

"The light intrigues me," Morrey remarked. "It seems very diffused, as if it was coming from everywhere. There doesn't seem to be a definite source such as our Sun, or even a lamp."

"Then whoever cut this tunnel and created this light must be very clever," Tony almost shouted. "Are we going to meet a new race of people down here, Chris?"

"I don't know," their leader confessed, "but all the signs point to it. That is—if they still exist."

"You mean they might have lived long ago but have now died out?"

"Could be."

"But the light? It's still being generated—if that's the word," Tony pointed out.

"That means nothing," Morrey reminded him. "Remember we have atomic-powered beacons and radio transmitters on the Moon and on some planets that will go on working for thousands of years."

"On the other hand, there may still be people living down here," Serge said quietly.

It was a staggering thought. How could anyone live inside the Earth? Our planet has always been believed to be solid, with a hot, perhaps molten core.

At this thought Serge glanced at the thermometer on his wrist. He could read it plainly in the diffused light.

"The temperature hasn't risen," he reported. "It's still twenty degrees Centigrade."

This was unusual, for in deep mines the temperature is uncomfortably high. Maybe the steady current of air flowing through the tunnel was keeping the temperature down. Yet if Earth's core was very hot, ought not this draught from the depths to be laden with searing heat?

"I recall reading the report of an experiment that took place in the States some time ago," Morrey told his friends. "It was to prove that the focal point of Earth's gravity is the centre of the Earth. Two plumb lines were hung down two deep mine-shafts some distance apart. At the bottom the shafts were connected by a straight cross-tunnel. The distances apart at the top and at the bottom of the plumb lines were measured very accurately. What do you think was the result?"

"As they were both hanging down and pointing to the centre of gravity, they would be slightly nearer to each other at the bottom than at the top," suggested Serge.

"That's what everybody expected," agreed Morrey. "If the centre of the Earth is the focus of all terrestrial gravity, then plumb lines—wherever they may be hung—should all point to that one place. So they should, indeed, be a little closer at the bottom than at the top."

"Could they measure that accurately?" asked Tony.

"They could—and did. But instead of the plumb lines being nearer to each other at the bottom, they were actually some inches farther apart!"

"But that's impossible!" Tony exploded.

"The experiment was repeated many times and in different places," replied Morrey. "The result was always the same."

"So that means that the centre of the Earth is not the centre of gravity," declared Serge.

"It means that our previous ideas about a dense core towards which everything is attracted are wrong."

"So the Earth could be hollow."

"It could indeed," Morrey agreed gravely. "So what do we do now?"

There were only two choices before them. Should they continue their search for Ian and explore more of this strange, unknown Inner World? Or should they return to the surface and report fully on their fantastic discovery?

It was a difficult decision. They had only limited supplies of oxygen, so they would not be able to penetrate the Underworld very far. If they could get masks that would filter the drugged atmosphere, that would be another matter. They could then return below and spend an indefinite time on their search and exploration.

On the other hand they still hadn't found the boy. All they had done was to confirm that he had been this way before them. He must be still farther down within the Inner World.

They all agreed that their first duty was to try to get him back.

"We go on," Chris said, voicing their unanimous resolve.

8

"Have you noticed how big the tunnel is getting?" Tony asked.

The walls and ceiling had receded greatly, so that the explorers no longer seemed confined to a narrow passageway. It was almost as if they were walking in open country, except that they could see, high above them, not the sky but the rocky roof of this Inner World.

"I have an idea," said Chris. "Let's see if the drugged atmosphere was confined just to the narrow cavern."

"You mean that the air here might not be the same?" Morrey asked.

"It must be the same," Serge objected. "Remember that the air is blowing from here along the tunnel to the upper Caves."

"All the same, it would be pretty easy to test my theory," Chris insisted.

"How are you going to do that? If it is still drugged we'll all be too drunk to get back into our helmets," Morrey reminded them.

"I suggest that only one of us tests the air," answered Chris. "The others could watch him and force his helmet back on if he acts peculiarly."

"Not me," protested Tony. "I've still got a bump on my head from the last time."

"Oh, I don't think we'd have to adopt the same measures again," laughed Chris. "I should think the other three could put the helmet back on without using too much violence."

"I'll try it if you like," volunteered Serge. "If I do go a bit queer I'm the smallest of the four. I'd probably give you least trouble."

So it was agreed. Carefully watched by his companions, Serge removed his helmet and inhaled the air of the Underworld. The others studied him closely for any strange reactions.

There were none. After nearly half an hour Serge signalled to the others that he still felt quite normal. Certainly he hadn't exhibited the slightest sign of the intoxication that the atmosphere had caused before.

"Take yours off next, Tony," Chris said over the radio.

The mechanic was only too willing to comply. No one wore helmets for the fun of the thing, and if they could now manage without them, so much the better. They would be able to extend their exploration considerably. Also they would be able to eat the food they had brought with them, Tony assured himself.

He removed his headgear and was then able to talk to Serge, who assured him that the air here seemed much the same as it did on the surface, and he certainly felt none of the effects he'd experienced in the narrow cavern.

"Come on. Let's chance it," Morrey said to Chris, and the leader agreed. So all four astronauts thankfully slung their helmets on to their chests and breathed the free air of the Underworld.

"I'm famished. I don't know about you three," Tony declared. It was many hours since they had left the auditorium and they had covered many miles.

"All right. We'll have a breather," agreed Chris, and they all sank on to the smooth floor to take a rest.

As they sat eating their food they looked round this wonderful place they had discovered. In the distance they could see walls of rock. The tunnel through which they had emerged was no longer visible, so Morrey tried to get a compass-bearing on its likely direction before they went any further.

It was useless. The needle of his compass wouldn't behave. One moment it was pointing one way and the next in an entirely different direction.

For a moment the astronauts were nonplussed. Then Tony came up with an idea.

"You can always get a compass bearing from a watch," he said. "First, you point the small hand towards the sun. Then you bisect the angle between the small hand and the figure '12', or the figure '1' if it's Summer Time. This gives you the north-south line. South is obviously nearest the sun. It's easy."

"Except for one thing," Chris observed gravely. Morrey and Serge seemed to have difficulty in controlling some emotion or other.

"What's that?" asked Tony. "And what's the matter with these two?"

"The only difficulty is that down here there's—well, there's no sun," Chris replied with a straight face. Morrey and Serge broke into roars of laughter.

"All right, you two," Tony said uncomfortably. "It was only an idea."

"Seriously, though, we must make sure that we can find our way back to the tunnel," Morrey said soberly. "At the moment we should be all right, for we seem to have emerged from a vast funnel."

"That's true," Chris agreed. "If we turn round and go back we should be guided into the tunnel mouth. But as we go on it will get more difficult."

They looked about them for landmarks. Near at hand the ground was smooth, the roof high and almost out of sight, while the walls had receded several miles. The golden glow of the Inner World was everywhere.

"Is that a building ahead?" asked Tony.

It certainly looked like it. In the strange light of the Inner World the astronauts had difficulty in judging distances, but they all agreed that the building must be a good three miles away. It was like a huge dome except for two irregular bulges. There could be no doubt that it was artificial.

"So there are—or have been—people living down here!" exclaimed Morrey. "I wonder if we shall meet any of them."

"What will they be like?" wondered Tony. "Do you think they will be hostile?" His hand slid towards his laser gun.

"We must assume they won't be—if they still exist—until it's proved otherwise," Chris insisted. "But that doesn't mean we shouldn't be cautious."

It was a strange world they had entered. There was no vegetation of any kind, just a seemingly endless expanse of polished rock and the all-pervading golden light. Every second it was becoming more difficult to remember that they were underground and that above their heads were mountains and oceans. Perhaps they were below the city of Palma, where tens of thousands of people were living their lives unconscious of the strange world beneath their feet. Maybe they were well out beneath the sea, with ocean liners ploughing their ways above them.

"What supports the roof?" whispered Tony in awe. "There are no pillars or columns that I can see."

"Perhaps it's held up by atmospheric pressure," suggested Morrey.

"And don't forget that experiment with the plumb lines that you told us about," Serge reminded him. "I have a feeling that our ideas about gravity are going to take some hard knocks after this."

There was much, so very much, that they would have liked to speculate upon, but Chris insisted that they should press on. So what better direction could they take than towards the dome-like structure that had attracted their attention?

It was Morrey who noticed the next strange thing. For several hours they had been walking down a fairly sharp slope. It would have been easy, though dangerous, to break into a run. The incline had been continuous and consistent. Looking back they expected to see a veritable mountain which they had descended. But Morrey's backward glance caused him to stop dead in utter astonishment. The slope had gone! They were walking on level ground.

"It can't be," he gasped. "We've been walking down an incline ever since we entered the Inner World. Now the slope has gone!"

The others were equally astounded. Then Serge came up with a possible explanation.

"We have been walking on what seemed a slope to us because we walk with our bodies upright," he said. "Our horizontal plane is at right angles to our upright body. As the sloping ground seems horizontal to us it can only mean that the angle of our bodies has changed. We are now walking at ninety degrees to the sloping floor."

"Then how is it we don't tumble forward?" Tony objected.

"Because our gravitational pull has altered its direction," Serge persisted. "The ground appears flat because gravity is at ninety degrees to it."

"But gravity cannot change its direction," spluttered Tony. "Even I know that."

"Nevertheless it's happened. If we went back I'm sure we should feel we were on a slope once more. Somewhere over the last mile or so things have changed. We haven't noticed when, because it's been too gradual."

It was an amazing situation. They certainly felt that they were standing upright on a horizontal ground. Yet they could look back to where they had known that they were on a slope and now it looked quite flat. They couldn't see any change in the angle of the floor, so it must be themselves who were walking at a different angle.

Chris reminded them that their experience was rather like what happened when they were in one of the giant wheel-like space stations. In order to simulate terrestrial gravity for the comfort of the crew, the giant "wheel" was rotated. Its centrifugal force in the corridor forming the hollow rim took the place of gravity—but with this peculiar difference. One could walk towards the upward-sloping floor ahead only to find that it always became horizontal under one's feet. The astronauts had many times walked all round the outer rim of a space station, coming back to the place from whence they had started, without once feeling that they were not on level floors. Yet they knew that they must have turned a complete somersault in the process.

As they got nearer to the dome their caution increased. Would they see any inhabitants of this fantastic world? Would they find Ian? Was this dome really a building of some kind? If so, what was its purpose?

A thousand questions flooded into their minds. So far they had seen no sign of any movement, but this didn't prevent them from going forward as quietly and cautiously as they could.

It was when they were half a mile from the structure that they noticed the aperture. From their distance it was difficult to judge its size, but if it was a door it was quite a small one. No other opening marred the smooth surface.

"I have a hunch we shall soon be meeting someone," Morrey said in a low voice. It was strange how all four whispered, and walked on the balls of their feet.

"Do you think we should spread out a bit?" asked Tony. He was beginning to have a queasy feeling in his stomach at the prospect of meeting the people of the Inner World.

"I don't think that matters," Chris whispered back. "If they are hostile, spreading out won't help us much."

"Do—do you think they are like us—human?" Tony asked.

"If they are, then they are certainly smaller," Serge observed. "If that opening is a door, even I would have to stoop to pass through."

Somehow the suggestion that the inhabitants of the Inner World were a race of small people cheered Tony tremendously.

"What are we creeping along and whispering for?" he demanded.

"Just a precaution," grinned Morrey. "But who is going to enter that opening?"

Chris had been thinking about this. Though he firmly believed that if there were people down here they would not be hostile, he had the safety of his little band to consider. It would obviously be wise for only one to approach the dome, whilst the other three remained at a respectful distance. He told the others what he thought, and instantly each asked to be the one to go ahead.

"Sorry, you three," Chris laughed, "as leader I claim the right to enter first."

There were, of course, protests and arguments from the others, but they knew that if Chris had made up his mind nothing would shake him. As the acknowledged leader, he had always claimed the right to face any danger first.

"Stay here," Chris said. "I'm going to have a quick peep inside. I'll call you forward if I think things are all right."

"And what if you don't?" asked Serge.

"Give me half an hour," Chris answered seriously, "and if I haven't come out again you are to return to the surface as quickly as possible."

"Leave you here? We can't do that," Morrey insisted. "I suggest that I follow you when you've been inside that dome for, say, five minutes."

"Nothing doing," Chris replied firmly. "You must all wait here until I signal you forward. That's an absolute 'must'. I don't anticipate any trouble, but it would be senseless for more than one of us to be at risk."

"Take the radio," suggested Tony, "and give us a running commentary on all you see. As long as we hear you talking we'll know you are all right."

"Will do," their leader agreed. "But don't forget this. If I order you to cut and run, you're to get back to the Outer World as quickly as possible—and not wait for me."

Though they all promised to carry out Chris's order should he give it, more than one made a mental reservation about it. Tony kept his fingers crossed when he made his promise.

Satisfied, Chris went forward, while Tony, Serge and Morrey formed an anxious, watchful group. Once or twice the radio crackled as Chris paused to test it. As he neared the structure the watchers felt their hearts speeding up under the increasing tension.

At four yards from the entrance Chris paused.

"This opening seems to be about four and a half feet high and three feet wide," he reported back. "There seems to be a barrier wall a couple of yards inside, so I can't see the interior."

"How does it look?" asked Morrey over the radio. "Does it look dark inside?"

"No. From what little I can see it's just as light inside the dome as it is out here."

"Can you see any other opening?"

"No. This seems to be the only door. I can't see anything that looks like windows, so presumably the place has inside lighting."

Then his friends saw Chris slowly approach the opening. He turned, gave them a wave, stepped inside, and was lost to view.

9

"Go back to the hotel and rest, sir," Smith pleaded with his employer. "I will arrange for you to be told immediately if anything happens."

Ebenezer Yates shook off the secretary's arm.

"You will arrange nothing. I am staying here."

For long hours, ever since he'd failed to persuade the astronauts to return, the old man had insisted on remaining at the cavern mouth. His mood had fluctuated between anger that his appeal had been ignored, anxiety for Ian, and bitter regret that he had ever involved the astronauts in this hopeless undertaking.

He had long since given up begging Major Carberra for help. His orders, said the Major, had been precise. He was to allow the four people chosen by Mr Yates to venture into the cavern—but no one else. He certainly wasn't going to risk the lives of any of his men in an attempt to save the explorers from their own foolhardiness and from the stupidity of a rich old man. Besides—he hadn't the space-helmets and oxygen for his men to use.

McKimm and Smith both asked permission to enter the dark cave. They were sternly refused by the Major, and it was then that the secretary tried to persuade the old man to abandon his vigil.

Suddenly Mr Yates's face lit up. He struggled to his feet from the bench on which he'd been sitting, and shuffled over to where the Spanish officer was pacing in front of that forbidding entrance.

"Major," Mr Yates said in his most formal manner, "I request that you and your men should withdraw at once. The Caves of Drach are now my private property, and as their owner I must ask you to leave without delay."

It would be an understatement to say that Major Carberra was astounded. At first he looked at the billionaire as if he could not have heard aright. Then, when Ebenezer repeated his request, the officer's face flushed and then went pale.

"I shall not withdraw from here until I receive orders to do so," he replied, recovering his composure a little.

"Then I suggest you contact your Ministry of Tourism and inquire whether or not I am the owner of the caves. You can also confirm that you and your men have no right to be here without my consent."

The Major's hand flew automatically to his pistol and he half drew it from its holster, but then thought better of it. Smith, speaking in Spanish, offered to go along with him to his office and wait while the officer telephoned to Madrid. The Major could hardly refuse, so with bad grace he handed over command to Captain Domingo, and went off at a rapid pace up the sloping pathway to the surface, with Smith hurrying along behind.

"What are we goin' to do, sirr, when we ha' got rid o' yon soldiers?" McKimm asked.

"I've been thinking about that," Ebenezer replied. "We know, from the last message that those young men sent back, that the cavern is filled with some form of poisoned air. To go in, we must have oxygen masks just as they had. So—I'm going to get some."

"Mr Yates, sirr, ye'll forgive me saying so, I'm sure, but you're in no condition to go into that hell-hole yersel'. Smith and me will go and look for the laddies."

"Thank you, McKimm. I expected that is what you would say." Mr Yates said with a bleak smile. "So you think I'm too old to go looking for my grandson, do you?"

"To be truthful, I do," the chauffeur answered doggedly. "Besides, we'll want someone here to organize things and receive messages on the telephone," he added slyly.

"Well, we'll see about that," Ebenezer said shortly. "Now, I want you to find Smith when he's finished with that Major. Tell him to get on to my office in Washington, and let them know what I want. I shall require arms, masks, and a supply of oxygen. See that the jet takes off immediately for Dulles Airport and tell Captain Matthews I expect him back here within twenty-four hours."

"Whew! That's pushing it, sirr," grinned McKimm, "but I'll do ma best."

He left the old man alone with the Captain and his soldiers, who were looking uneasy. From time to time they cast anxious glances into the dark cavern—but all was still. The yawning blackness was ready to swallow up more victims.

Ebenezer paced about impatiently until Major Carberra returned, on his own. McKimm must have given Smith his instructions.

"Well?" Ebenezer barked. "Isn't it as I told you? Will you now get your men off my property?"

There was a glint in the officer's eyes as he returned his Captain's salute.

"One moment, Mr Yates," he said. "The Minister has confirmed that you are the owner of the Caves of Drach, and as such I cannot remain on your property without your permission. However," he went on, and the glint in his eyes became more pronounced, "your ownership does not extend to this cavern beyond the barrier. So my men and I will remain."

But Ebenezer wasn't to be beaten.

"Very well, Major," he said icily. "Then you will take your men off my property. You may withdraw them into the cavern which still belongs to your Government, or you may return to the surface. Which is it to be?"

The soldiers had been shuffling uneasily during this conversation. Though none of them understood what was being said, they guessed that it had something to do with that dreaded place. Seeing their uneasiness, and knowing the cavern's reputation, the Major had no illusions about what would happen if he ordered his men to leave the brightly lit auditorium and station themselves within the dark cave. He couldn't risk the possibility of mutiny. He must concede defeat for the moment and withdraw his contingent to the surface. If this old fool wanted to risk more lives—including his own—that was his business.

"Mr Yates," the officer said, trying to speak with a dignity he didn't feel, "I shall withdraw my men from your property to the surface. But I must warn you that my Government will hold you responsible for anything that may happen from this moment onwards."

"I accept that responsibility," the American said with equal dignity.

Then the two men shook hands, the Major saluted and gave a crisp order to his men. With visible relief and wide grins the Spanish soldiers marched behind the Major and the Captain and withdrew from the Caves of Drach.

Inside the entrance of the dome Chris found himself in a narrow corridor that followed the curving wall round to his right. The uncanny golden glow was everywhere, just as it had been outside. He could see no lamps or any other source from which the light might be coming. He walked along until he came to the end of the corridor, which led into what he could only describe as a large room. And it was there that an incredible sight met his eyes.

Chris rubbed his eyes and slapped his face quite sharply to make sure he wasn't dreaming. In the centre of the room sat a young boy surrounded by six humanoid beings!

The boy must be Ian Campbell, and the others—Chris had never seen anything like them before. They were about four feet tall, and they had large, bald heads. Their skin was a golden brown, and their arms and legs were slender—almost thin. They wore tunics in various shades of brown and yellow. In many ways they looked like children, but Chris had no doubt that these were adult members of a strange underground race.

Ian—and it surely was he—appeared to be sitting on a hassock of some kind, as were several of the men of the Inner World. The boy looked quite well and happy and seemed to be talking freely to his audience. It sounded as if they were plying him with questions and he was answering them fluently. The voices of the little people were surprisingly deep; Chris would have expected them to be high-pitched. All this he took in in the briefest of time. Then, scarcely breathing, he crept back into the corridor and out of sight. As quietly as possible he made his way back to the doorway to report to his friends for he dare not use his radio.

It was with great relief that Morrey, Serge, and Tony saw him emerge from the small doorway. Every one of the five minutes he had been out of their sight had seemed an age. Tony had been on the point of suggesting a rescue operation when Chris, stooping, came out of the opening.

His mind was racing with a jumble of thoughts about the sight he had just witnessed, but as best he could he told his companions what he had seen.

"You're sure it was Ian?" gasped Tony. "And he seemed all right?"

"It was a young boy, and I can only assume he was Mr Yates's grandson. He was certainly different from the other six people."

"People? So you think they are humans?" Serge asked. "Are they like a race of Pygmies?"

"They're human all right, but I've never seen pictures of any Pygmies who looked at all like these people."

"Pygmies couldn't have built this dome," Tony pointed out. "And what about the golden light?"

"It seems that they are not hostile," Serge observed. "No harm seems to have befallen young Ian?"

"None that I could see. He seemed to be quite at home."

"Well, our job is to take him back to his grandfather," Tony reminded them. "I suppose we won't have any difficulty?"

Chris looked doubtful. After being away from his grandfather for so long, and being lost in this underground world, Ian might have been expected to be showing signs of distress and anxiety. Yet in the short glimpse Chris had had of him, he certainly hadn't seemed to be unhappy. Indeed, he looked as if he were enjoying himself.

"I don't know," Chris confessed, "but we'll have to overcome any difficulties. What can we say to Mr Yates if we go back without Ian?"

"If the Inner World people were talking to Ian, they must speak English," Tony said suddenly. "I wonder how they can do that?"

"If we stay here talking we'll never find out, will we?" Chris said with a smile. "Shall we go and introduce ourselves?"

"There were no signs of weapons?" asked Tony.

"None that I could see, but then I don't suppose they would use anything so primitive as our laser guns. Come on. Let's go."

Nevertheless, Tony couldn't resist resting his hand on his blaster.

They went forward until they reached the structure. Serge paused to see what it was made of, but from a brief inspection he was unable to decide. There seemed to be no cracks or joints in the whole building. Then Chris bent down to lead the way inside.

Once through the entrance they again paused to take in their surroundings and to listen for any sound. The curving corridor was filled with light and Morrey remarked, "Know something? I've never seen a shadow in this Inner World."

Now that he had said it, they realized it was true. The golden light seemed to be coming from everywhere and nowhere. Both inside and outside the building the illumination was the same. There were no shadows or even corners of darkness.

"Let's go and meet the 'locals'," urged Tony. "I hope they'll make us welcome."

In single file, Chris leading, they edged forward until they came to the end of the corridor and could look into the big room. Chris knew what to expect, and he'd described the scene as best he could to the others. But even he was astounded at what they now saw.

This time there were scores of the little people—and they were all looking expectantly towards the entrance and towards the intruders. It seemed as if the explorers were expected.

As the four paused irresolutely at the entrance to the large room one of the small people came forward to meet them. As far as they could see he carried no weapon of any kind, and his hands were held out towards them as if in welcome.

The four astronauts studied him intently as he came towards them. It was a tremendous moment, as shattering as if they were making their first contact with a creature from another planet. But these people were not of another planet. They were of Earth, but of a part of Earth never previously dreamed of.

"We bid you welcome to Cenobia," the little man said. His booming voice seemed strange coming from such a small body, yet it was pleasing. His face was creased with a smile. He spoke English without any trace of a foreign accent.

Chris was the first to recover from the shock.

"Who—who are you?" he managed to ask.

"My name is Argan," the little man replied pleasantly. "You are among friends. But you are tired? You would like refreshment?"

"We are all right," Chris answered for all of them. He still couldn't quite take in the situation.

"Then come and join us," Argan invited them, with a sweeping gesture. "Come and meet a young friend from the Outer World."

Some sixth sense warned Chris to be cautious. With a quick sideways glance he warned the others. They decided to let their leader do the talking.

"Not many people join us from the Outer World," Argan went on, leading the way back to Ian and the other Cenobians. "So that, so soon after our young recruit, your coming is very welcome."

Chris was about to say that the reason why so few people strayed into the Underworld was because of the guard which had been mounted on the cavern by the Spanish Government. But again something held him back. Why had no one ever returned from this subterranean place?

"We shall be very interested to hear all your news of the Outer World," Argan continued. "This boy cannot tell us very much. We are just in the process of learning his story."

Hm! thought Chris. They are keen to find out all they can about us. Why is it we have never heard anything about them?

"Do not be surprised that I speak your language," Argan smiled. "We have knowledge of the many tongues that are now spoken in your Outer World. Also many that have long since died."

"You speak our language very well," said Chris admiringly, and Argan acknowledged the compliment gratefully.

"My friends," he said, addressing the gathering of Cenobians, "we are fortunate indeed that we have more recruits from the Outer World. Newcomers are now so rare that we must make our new colonists very comfortable. We must do all we can to make their lives among us very happy. We must give them homes such as they are used to, for we want them to have a long and happy life in Cenobia."

10

Somewhere to live? A long and happy life in Cenobia? Did he expect them to stay?

"Er—we are tired. We would like somewhere to rest," Chris said suddenly. It was essential for him to talk the situation over with the other three. They were still keeping silent in response to his signal, but they must have been just as astounded as he at Argan's remarks.

"By all means," the Cenobian said courteously, "but may I first introduce you to some of my friends?"

He led them to where five others of his race stood a little apart. Ian was with them. The boy looked without surprise, or even interest, at the newcomers from the Outer World.

"We have some more recruits," Argan told his friends, "and we are very fortunate to get them so soon after young Ian. But they have asked for rest, so we must let them take it before we seek knowledge from them."

Then he turned to the astronauts.

"What are your names, my friends?" he asked. "What may we call you?"

They told him their names and in return he informed them that the five Cenobians were Rollo, Tun, Ikor, Skim and Ballu. They each gave a little bow as their names were mentioned. To Tony they all looked very much alike. He doubted whether he would be able to tell which was which even if he remembered their names. Each of the astronauts mumbled a few polite words, and the Cenobians smiled back. Ian was not introduced and did not speak.

"Be good enough to follow me," Argan requested when the ceremony was over. "Your home is a little distance away."

He led them through the crowd of curious Cenobians to another small door, and apologized because they had to stoop to go through.

"I fear these doors were not designed for tall men like you," he smiled.

Another corridor, another door, and they were outside the dome on the side opposite the one through which they had entered. They stood wondering what would happen next.

"A car will be coming along to take us to your homes," Argan told them. "They are furnished much as are those Outside, but we have very few newcomers now, so they may not be quite what you are used to in your World. Our homes would not be suitable for you, for we neither eat nor sleep."

"Not eat or sleep?" Tony burst out. "But no one can live without doing those. . . ."

"No, we need neither of these things," Argan smiled. "All will be made plain to you very soon. You and we have much to tell each other. But here is our car."

A vehicle had indeed arrived, but in their surprise at Argan's revelation they hadn't noticed it. Now they looked at it curiously.

The car seemed of very simple construction—half a dozen seats riding on top of four large balls. They could see no frame to keep the seats and balls in place, nor any controls in front of the Cenobian sitting in what should be the driver's seat. How did the car work? What was its motive power? Did the balls act like wheels? They would soon see, for Argan was courteously inviting them to climb aboard.

They complied. The seats were comfortable, but they were all too curious to learn about the vehicle for them to settle down. Tony noticed a small pedal at the driver's feet, and this seemed to be the only control.

Argan spoke to the driver in his deep rumbly voice, but in a language that not even Serge was familiar with. The car moved off smoothly and without noise.

Yes, the seats were comfortable. At least they would have been if the astronauts hadn't still been wearing oxygen bottles on their backs and helmets slung across their chests. Argan had eyed this equipment curiously, and there was no doubt that he would want to know all about it when the questioning began.

Chris wasn't at all sure that he wished to tell the Cenobian everything. He couldn't forget Argan's strange assumption that they had come to the Inner World for good. He would see what the others thought when they had their private discussion.

The car travelled at what Tony estimated was about twenty miles an hour, but was actually much faster. It was difficult to judge speed in this monotone world where distances were deceptive. The ground, too, was smooth, and with a completely silent engine, there was little indication of the true speed at which they were travelling.

There was no road as such, for all the surface looked hard and polished. So the astronauts imagined that the amazing car would be able to go in any direction, the Cenobian driver only having to turn the vehicle in the required direction. This he seemed able to do with just a slight movement of his body, which tilted the car slightly and turned it in the way he wanted it to go.

It wasn't long before the passengers saw another dome looming up—similar in shape to the one from which they had just come but smaller. In fact, they could see a whole row of such structures with many Cenobian cars shuttling between them. Perhaps this was an Inner World town or village.

It seemed that the sixth dome that they came to was to be their home, for it was here that the car stopped. Argan invited them to get out.

"We hope you will be comfortable here—at least for a time," he said. "Perhaps we can offer you better accommodation after you have become used to our ways."

"Thank you," Chris answered politely. Some sixth sense warned him against telling the Cenobians plainly that they had come to collect Ian and to take him back to the Outer World and to his grandfather as quickly as possible.

The dome to which they had been brought had obviously been modified to suit Outer Worlders. The doors were higher, and the astronauts didn't have to stoop to enter. They came into a central hall with numerous doors leading from it.

"This is where we usually accommodate you people to begin with," Argan explained. "Unfortunately, there are not enough of you to fill it, so some of us also live here. You will not mind, I hope, living alongside your new compatriots. It will help you to get accustomed to our ways much more quickly."

Chris had to grip Tony's arm to stop the outburst that nearly came.

The rooms were all the same, each some ten feet square and furnished with a bed, a cupboard and two hassocks. Each was flooded with the golden light.

"I must tell you that as we do not eat as you do we make special arrangements for your needs," Argan continued. "Food will be brought to you—not quite the same as your own, I fear, but palatable enough, I am told. You may eat when you will."

To have kept silent now would have been beyond human capacity, and would certainly have seemed unnatural to the Cenobian.

"You don't eat?" asked Chris incredulously. "But you must maintain your bodily energy?"

"That is true," Argan smiled, "but we take tablets that provide all that our bodies need. You will partake of food we prepare specially for Outer Worlders. It will be brought to you in what you would call one half hour. Meanwhile, if you wish for anything, you will always find many of our people about, and all will be happy to help you."

Chris thanked him and asked when they would see him again.

"In twelve hours I will call for you," Argan replied. "Then we will have much to tell each other, for my colleagues are anxious to learn all about you and your former way of life. Perhaps you will now get some rest."

"Whew!" breathed Tony as soon as Argan had glided away in the car. "What do you make of it all?"

They were gathered in the room that had been allocated to Chris and now, for the first time, they felt free to express themselves.

"One thing is crystal clear," Chris started off. "They don't expect us ever to return to the surface—or even to want to."

"That's pretty obvious," Morrey agreed. "They seem to think that once we have tasted the delights of Cenobia, we shall never wish to see daylight again."

"Did you notice that Ian didn't seem very anxious to return home?" Serge asked. "He ignored us, whereas I should have thought that he would have been overjoyed to see us."

"I have a theory," Chris said thoughtfully. "It's about that length of cavern filled with the drugged air. Anyone who breathes it has an overwhelming urge to continue on down into Cenobia and has no wish ever to return."

"And it's because we wore oxygen helmets and were not drugged that we still want to go back?" Tony asked.

"Exactly," Chris nodded. "I bet we are the first ever to enter the cavern who haven't breathed the drug."

"But the Cenobians don't know that," Serge observed. "They assume that, like everyone else who has strayed down into their World, we are conditioned to stay."

"That is why I signalled you all to be quiet," said Chris. "We've got to plan this very carefully."

"As I see it," Morrey said slowly, "the Cenobians have a very effective piece of machinery for collecting recruits and information from our World. It's been a one-way journey for everyone before. No person has ever gone back out of the Caves of Drach. Now that the Spanish Government has put a guard on the cavern, the Cenobians must lack people to tell them about the Outer World."

"The thing is—what will they think when we tell them we're going back and that we're taking Ian with us?" Chris mused.

"I don't think they'll mind," Tony declared. "How can they?"

"They can, and they will," was Serge's opinion. "How is it that we of the Outer World know nothing of the people down here? It can only be because the Cenobians have no desire to let us know. They want, in fact, to keep their existence a secret from the people on the surface. They want to learn all they can about us, but they don't want us to know a thing about them."

The four astronauts were silent for a time, each turning the situation over in his mind.

"I think we must give the Cenobians the impression that we, too, are keen to settle here," said Chris at length. "We must find out more about them. Then my guess is that we shall have to plan and execute our return with Ian without letting them know."

"They're very friendly now," Morrey said. "But do we know they would keep friendly if we told them we were going back?"

"I'm with you there," Chris nodded. "Above all we must protect our helmets and oxygen from them. If they found out how these worked and took them away from us, we could say goodbye to ever getting outside again."

"You think that if we tried to go back without masks we should only get as far as the cavern where the air is drugged?" Tony asked.

"That's about it," Morrey agreed. "Then we should get a whiff of the gas—and back we should come of our own free will."

"And after that we should never want to leave Cenobia," Serge added.

It was a difficult situation. Though they had no positive proof that the Cenobians would turn hostile if they announced their intention to return, it seemed very likely. If they had preserved the secret of their existence for so long they would try very strenuously to prevent it being revealed now.

The golden light, the drugged cavern, the car with no known motive power, pointed to the fact that these Cenobians were not a people to be trifled with. They must have an advanced technology, and therefore considerable power.

"We must plan our escape secretly," Chris decided. "Under no circumstances must we let Argan and his friends suspect that we are not perfectly content to remain in Cenobia for the rest of our lives."

"What about when they question us? What shall we tell them?" asked Tony.

Chris thought for a moment.

"The main thing we have to keep from them is the purpose of our helmets and oxygen bottles," he said. "We must avoid reference to any subject that might involve such things—space travel, deep-sea diving etc. Apart from that I don't see any harm in talking freely. They probably know a great deal already."

"But their information hasn't been updated recently," Morrey pointed out. "Young Ian couldn't have told them much."

They were interrupted. A knock sounded on the door and a smiling Cenobian stood outside holding a tray. On it were four plates, each with lumps of what looked like synthetic meat. There were no knives—just a fork alongside each plate. The tray also carried four tumblers of a clear liquid.

"I am Meno," the Cenobian announced, "and I am appointed to look after you. Here is food and drink. I hope you like it. Others from the Outer World have."

"Thank you," Chris answered politely. He had no idea whether he was speaking to a man or woman, for it had just struck him sharply that all Cenobians looked alike.

"I will come and take your things away after you have eaten," Meno said. "Then perhaps you would like to rest."

He—if it was a "he"—spoke with a higher-pitched voice than Argan, but it was still too deep for a woman's. Had the others noticed this difficulty, Chris wondered. The Cenobian withdrew with a slight bow.

Tony peered at their meal curiously. As astronauts they were used to synthetic and processed food, and often this had been quite palatable, but Tony had never ceased to proclaim his preference for ordinary food.

"Give me steak and chips, with apple pie and cream to follow," was usually his verdict.

What would this Cenobian food be like? Argan himself had said that his people didn't take sustenance in the same way as Outer Worlders did.

"Do you think we ought to eat it?" Morrey asked. "May it not be drugged like the air in the cavern? For the same purpose, of course."

"It could be," Chris admitted, "but it's a risk we must take. We shall have to spend a little time down here, so unless we plan to starve we'd better try what they have to offer."

"Of course," he went on after a moment, "if it is drugged we'd better grab Ian and make a dash for it as best we can."

"How shall we know if it is drugged?" asked Tony.

"My guess is that we should lose our inclination to return to the surface," Chris told him. "So we must watch ourselves. Remember it might affect some more rapidly than others."

"Tony, for example," smiled Serge.

Tony grimaced in reply.

"Anyway, I'm going to try it," he announced.

11

As soon as the Spanish officers and their men had made their strategic retreat, Ebenezer Yates swung into action. It was not by accident that he had built up one of the greatest business empires in the world. The years seemed to slip away from him as he organized for the challenge of the Caves of Drach.

"We must recruit a team to enter the cavern," he declared. "In fact, we must have several teams, some to act as back-ups for the others. We must establish forward bases inside the cavern with dumps of oxygen bottles. We must construct a series of airtight chambers as we advance so that the explorers can enter them to eat and rest without their masks. Each chamber will be linked by cable to this auditorium. We will turn this place into our command headquarters."

So Mr Yates planned on. One would almost have said that he was enjoying the situation, and indeed he would have been if the lives of his grandson and those four splendid young fellows had not been at stake.

Smith and McKimm were constantly sent scurrying to the surface with messages and commands from the billionaire. In many places supplies were being collected and organized for transport to the caves. Radio orders poured out in a stream to many of Mr Yates's business enterprises. Captain Matthews's jet was only one of several Company planes that came streaking towards Majorca.

"Smith! McKimm!" the old man barked some time later. "Did you say you would go into the cavern?"

He was at last beginning to show signs of strain after this feverish activity and intensive planning. Now almost all was organized—except for the men who were to do the job. Equipment would soon be pouring in, but what about the men who were going to rob the dread cavern of its secrets, who were going to find the boy and the four astronauts? Or bring back their lifeless bodies.

Neither man hesitated.

"I am willing to go after Master Ian," Smith said quietly, "though I have had no experience in caving or wearing an oxygen mask."

"Och, man! There's nothing to it," McKimm declared. "We'll go, sirr, but we'll want more men."

"I've been thinking about that," Mr Yates told them. "No doubt I could assemble a hundred—even a thousand—of my men if need be. But time is important in this operation. Are there any of the local people whom I could hire to join you on this mission?"

Smith looked thoughtful, but it was McKimm who came up with an idea.

"I wouldna depend too much on local folk," he said. "They all seem too scared of this black hole. But I'll wager I can get all the men you want from the Spotted Dog."

"The Spotted Dog?" asked the puzzled Ebenezer.

"That's the name of an English-type pub much frequented by Britons and Americans," Smith explained to his employer.

"I'm sure, when I tell the men in the bar what's happening, they'll march down here in a body," the chauffeur declared. "And they'll no' want paying. I—er—do take a wee dram there occasionally, and I know those laddies."

"Then I'll leave that to you, McKimm, but I'll want about twenty-five reliable men. Pick one out to lead them and send him to me as soon as possible."

"I'm on ma way," grinned the Scot, glancing at his watch. "The bar will just be filling up the noo."

While Mr Yates and his secretary went on discussing details of equipment, McKimm hurried to the surface and jumped into the yellow car. Night was just falling and lights were beginning to come on, some of them winking from the mountain sides. The globes of the deep-space communication station were floodlit; to what far-off listener were they talking?

Humming a Scottish air, the chauffeur hurled the car forward as if it were vital to save every second he could.

"A pint of the usual, Toni," he called as he burst into the bar.

Already there were a number of men and a few women keeping Toni and Iris fully occupied. Everyone stared at McKimm.

Toni, who had just rung up a transaction on the cash register, turned to serve him.

"What is going on up at the caves?" he asked in an urgent whisper as he held a pint glass under the appropriate tap.

"Great goings on," McKimm answered, eyeing the filling glass eagerly. "I want to tell everyone about it, but ma throat's a wee bit dry at the moment."

When he pushed the money forward Toni waved it away impatiently.

"The Island is buzzing with talk," he declared. "You tell us what you know, Mr McKimm."

The chauffeur drained his glass with incredible speed. Then he banged it on the bar. Already many of the men were looking at him curiously. At the noise, conversation stopped and he had their complete attention.

"Toni has asked what is going on at the Caves of Drach," he said as Toni refilled his glass. "That's just what I'm here for. Now listen, all of you, and I'll tell ye something ye'll hardly believe."

For the next ten minutes the chauffeur held his audience spellbound with his account of the strange happenings below ground. He told how the soldiers had been withdrawn and how Mr Yates was organizing supplies for an expedition into the cavern. Now all that was wanted was for men to volunteer.

"Any of you interested?" McKimm concluded as he applied himself to his glass again.

When he put it down again a man had planted himself squarely in front of him. He was tall and middle-aged, and had a vast, bristling moustache, once ginger, now almost white.

"Who did you say were the four men who went in after the lad?" he demanded.

"Four astronauts who happened to be here on holiday. They are Mr Godfrey, Mr Smyslov, Mr——"

"I know. I know," the bewhiskered man interrupted excitedly. "They are my four old friends. My name is Greatrex. Those four young rips always called me 'Whiskers', though I don't know why," he concluded with a twinkle.

Several other men now came forward. One of them spoke to Mr Greatrex.

"Aren't you the chap who used to train the astronauts?" he asked. "The Wing Commander?"

"The very same. Now what about it, fellers? Who's coming with me down that hell-hole?"

Most of the men in the Spotted Dog were past middle age, but they had kept themselves fit by yachting or golfing. Some were retired and, if the truth be confessed, were sometimes bored with their idyllic existence. Others were on vacation, and there were at least a dozen from Mr Yates's own country. Most had heard of him.

"I'm coming."

"I'll go."

"Count me in."

Men were crowding eagerly round McKimm and Whiskers. Very few hung back. Iris had been watching the proceedings with a flushed face and sparkling eyes. One felt that at any moment she would volunteer herself. But Toni forestalled her.

"I will enter the cavern with you," he said simply, "and Iris will serve here while we are away."

His wife's eyes shone with pride, for it had rankled with her that Toni had been scared by the rumours about that dreadful cavern. Now, it seemed, he was willing to enter it and do what he could for those four handsome young men.

"Let's get your names down," bellowed the ex-Wing Commander. "Come on. Form up. Let's have some sort of order."

Almost mechanically those men, some of whom had been in the Forces, obeyed the commands of the ex-officer. Some of them pulled back their shoulders, as they scented excitement and danger. One by one they gave Whiskers their names and addresses. Two even saluted, which brought a wide grin from the former R.A.F. man. He could tell they had been in the Junior Service.

"Twenty-two of us. That enough?" Whiskers asked McKimm. "I daresay there'll be scores wanting to join when news of this gets round."

"I'm sure Mr Yates will be most grateful, sirr," the chauffeur replied. "Now I wonder if ye'd come back wi' me to the caves? Mr Yates will be wanting to tell you what he has in mind."

"O.K. You fellows stay here," Whiskers bellowed, "and watch what you're drinking. We don't know how soon it will be before we have to 'scramble'."

Again the yellow car tore along the island roads, and on the journey Whiskers questioned McKimm about Chris and the others. He hadn't seen them for more than a year. He told the chauffeur how closely he'd been associated with them during the preparations for so many space flights, how he'd shared their triumphs and disappointments, had talked to them over the radio when all had seemed lost.

Quite by chance he'd arrived that day in Majorca for a month's holiday. His wife, Mary, was having to care for an aged mother in Buckinghamshire. So Whiskers, with mixed feelings, had decided to come to this sunny isle for a spot of golf and sailing. As soon as he'd arrived he'd wondered if it had been a mistake. Would he be bored? Would he get fed up with playing about for a whole month? Then this thing had turned up. Even if it had not been his friends who were involved he would have welcomed the challenge. Since Chris and the others were at risk nothing was going to stop him doing everything humanly possible to help them.

"Have ye ever worn an oxygen mask?" asked McKimm as the car went round a corner on two wheels.

"Sure," the ex-officer grinned. "When I did a bit of high flying during that little dust-up with Jerry."

In a remarkably short time they skidded to a halt in the car park of the Caves, and scurried down the path to the auditorium. Mr Yates was waiting anxiously. Smith had gone to the airport, where equipment was already beginning to arrive.

McKimm did the introductions. He told Mr Yates that, by general consent, Wing Commander Greatrex would lead the squad of twenty-two men who had volunteered to search the cavern. Ebenezer eyed Whiskers keenly as he expressed his thanks. Yes, there was determination here, and when the ex-officer revealed his long-standing friendship with the astronauts, the old man felt a flood of relief. Fortune had indeed favoured him by sending Mr Greatrex along to the Island at that particular time.

The two men discussed plans for some time after Ebenezer had told all he knew and revealed the facts about the drugged atmosphere.

"Well, now that we know about this we can cope with it," Whiskers assured him. "Probably what has happened is that my friends didn't have enough oxygen to get back."

"You can have all the oxygen you need, and enough cable to circle the globe if you want it. It's all on its way here—and a supply of masks."

"Right!" said Whiskers briskly. "Now can I get on to the chaps waiting at the Spotted Dog? I'll phone them to come here for a briefing."

Ebenezer liked the crisp, decisive way the Wing Commander was taking charge of the situation. For the first time since Ian had disappeared he felt he could begin to relax. He had a feeling that if anyone could rescue his grandson and the four astronauts, it would be this man and the others who had volunteered to help him.

"You'll find a phone in the office near the car park," he told Whiskers, and the ex-officer hurried away to summon his waiting team. Within minutes a convoy of cars, lights blazing, was leaving the Spotted Dog. Toni was in the leading car, for he claimed that no one knew the road better than he.

Whiskers returned to the auditorium to tell the elderly American that his volunteer force was already racing to the caves. When did he expect the equipment to come?

Ebenezer estimated that it would be a full twelve hours—maybe eighteen—before all the gas, the cable and the helmets had arrived. He had also ordered four lightweight cabins that were airtight and could be easily transported. If the expedition was protracted, the rescuers could use the cabins for rest and refreshment.

"Have you any trucks?" Whiskers inquired.

"Trucks? No. Do you want some?"

"They would certainly help. You know—electric trucks similar to those running about at the airport. They could carry the cabins, the cable and perhaps even the men."

"You shall have them," Ebenezer declared. "McKimm, get on to Smith and tell him what Mr Greatrex wants. Tell him to hurry."

McKimm saluted. This military atmosphere was catching.

It's great, he grinned to himself as he raced back to the surface, to have a real officer in charge.

While he was waiting for his convoy of troops to arrive, Whiskers made a short excursion into the cavern. He noted the fallen rocks, but he didn't think that the small trucks would have any difficulty in getting past them. When he came back he listened to the tape of the astronauts' reports. By the time he was through there was a great clattering down the pathway from the surface.

"First time I've come into the caves without paying," one of the volunteers shouted cheerfully as the score or so of men assembled in the auditorium.

"Line up, fellers, and let me introduce you to Mr Yates," Whiskers bellowed, and his men fell into some sort of line.

After telling them who Mr Yates was, and about Ian's disappearance, he told the volunteers about the efforts of his astronaut friends. He reported their taped messages, including their evidence that the boy had definitely gone into the cavern, and explained about the strange atmosphere and its peculiar effects. Hence the need for everyone to wear oxygen masks, to avoid falling under the insidious influence of the drug.

The Wing Commander found that several of his men had had experience of wearing masks, and he arranged to give the others intensive training as soon as the supplies arrived. He told them that the general plan was to set up a base and oxygen dump short of the point where the drugged atmosphere began. The small trucks would transport the gear, including the portable airtight cabins for a series of forward bases.

One of the men, called Timms, mentioned that he'd been a sergeant in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. Whiskers gave him the task of maintaining the telephone link. Another had mountaineering experience and was quite at home with an oxygen mask. His job, then, was to train the others.

Whiskers was quite enjoying himself organizing his expedition, while Mr Yates looked on silently but with growing confidence in the bewhiskered ex-officer. He would see that these volunteers were made aware of his gratitude when all this was over.

The briefing ended, Greatrex ordered his men to dismiss, but before they could break up Smith came down to report that lorries were beginning to arrive at the car park with oxygen and equipment. He had managed to buy, at an exorbitant price, four electric trucks from the airport, and they were being unloaded at that moment.

Though it was after midnight Whiskers countermanded his order for his squad to dismiss and gave them all the job of getting the stores down into the auditorium. The electric trucks proved a boon, and the task was completed fairly quickly. As the masks had arrived, though it was getting late, everyone had a session with them. Those who had never worn a mask before were taught how to put them on, how to care for them, and how to work in them.

At last Whiskers professed himself satisfied and told his men that now they could really go home. The drums of telephone cable had still to be delivered, so he instructed them all to get what rest they could. On the morrow they would return to wring their secret from the dreaded Caves of Drach.

12

"Not bad," was Tony's verdict.

He had eaten one of the lumps of food that the Cenobians had provided. Though it tasted like nothing he'd had before, it was appetizing. There was a peculiar flavour about it that he couldn't identify. For a moment he wondered if this might be due to some drug in the food. But if that had been the Cenobians' intention, surely they would have employed a tasteless drug.

The others followed Tony's lead. It was a long time since they had eaten, and they were feeling quite hungry. The meal soon revived their strength and spirits, and they agreed that if this was a sample of Cenobian fare, they would have no cause to grumble.

"They don't know what they're missing if they only live on tablets," Tony declared as he finished his last mouthful. All four had drunk the clear liquid and found it very refreshing.

Soon after they had cleared their plates Meno returned and, seeing that the quartet had left nothing, smiled his satisfaction.

"I am happy that you like the food we have given you," he (or she) said politely. "It is made from chemicals that we have in abundant supply."

"But what is it that keeps you going, Meno?" asked Tony. "What are your tablets made from?"

"Argan will tell you everything," the Cenobian answered with a friendly smile. "Now perhaps you will take some rest."

With another slight bow he withdrew. It was true that the astronauts were feeling exhausted, and if they were to face the surprises of the morrow and plan their escape, they must rest.

"Let's turn in," Chris suggested, "and we'll see what Argan has to say tomorrow."

"Tomorrow" was a strange word to use in Cenobia, for time was not divided by light and darkness into separate days. Only chronometers recorded its passage. The astronauts synchronized their watches and arranged to meet in Chris's room in eight hours. Then they separated, each to get what rest he could.

When he was alone Chris looked round his room more closely than he had done before. The bed and the cupboard were plain but adequate. If the Cenobians themselves didn't sleep they must have trapped a goodly number of Outer Worlders over the years and learned how to make them comfortable.

Then Chris sat on his bed, and the strangest thing happened. The golden light disappeared and the room became completely dark!

This was the first time he'd seen darkness since entering Cenobia. He sprang up from his bed in surprise, and light flooded the room once more.

Several trials convinced Chris that there was some mechanism, which he was unable to detect, that switched off the all-pervading light when he put his weight on the bed. Was this because the Cenobians knew that humans usually sleep better in the darkness?

Chris climbed into bed, and in the unaccustomed gloom he tried to apply his mind to their situation. But it was of no use. He was far too tired to think clearly, and within minutes he was fast asleep. His companions must have done the same, for they each felt much refreshed when they met some eight hours later.

"I'd like to find out how this light is switched off," Tony said as they gathered in Chris's room. Though he was sitting on the bed the light was still on, so it wasn't just a simple mechanism that operated when there was a weight on the bed.

"There's a lot we'd all like to find out about Cenobia," Chris agreed, "and I suppose Argan will tell us a great deal. If he does, it will show that he's certain we shall never return to betray the secret of the Inner World's existence."

"Do you think they would let us take Ian back if we gave a firm undertaking not to reveal what we have found?" asked Morrey.

"I'm quite sure they wouldn't," Chris replied. "There's too much at stake. One word, one hint, that we'd found living people in this underground world would be sufficient to send hordes of explorers to invade Cenobia."

"So you think, to get Ian back, we'll have to do it without Cenobian help—and possibly in face of their hostility?"

"I'm sure of it," Chris replied. "They are all very friendly and polite to us, because they want all the information we can give. Also they think that we've settled here for the rest of our lives. But if we give the slightest indication that we escaped the effects of their drug and plan to return to the surface my guess is that they'll do everything they can to stop us."

"Including the use of force?" asked Serge.

"Including force," Chris replied seriously. "The preservation of their secret must be all-important to them."

"I suggest we find out all we can about the Cenobian civilization," said Morrey. "It could be of great help to us in planning our escape."

"I agree," Chris told him, "but we must be on our guard against letting Argan and his friends know that we were able to avoid the effect of their drug. Oh—er—here's Meno."

Meno had appeared in the doorway, but how much, if any, of Chris's last remarks he had heard there was no means of knowing. He was smiling and polite as usual when he invited them to follow him for their first session with Argan and the Cenobian Council.

The ride in the car was swift and smooth. Meno and the driver chatted together in their own language, while the astronauts stared about them with interest. Their temporary residence appeared to be on the outskirts of a village or town, whilst the Council Hall to which they were now being taken was well away from this centre.

Cenobian cars were passing backwards and forwards—indeed, in all directions, everyone made for his destination in a straight line. Few inhabitants of this Inner World appeared to walk any distance. Their cars took them everywhere.

At the Council Hall Argan and his fellow Councillors were outside to meet their guests, whom they greeted politely. Then the whole party moved inside to the room where the astronauts had first met the Cenobians.

After assuring himself that the newcomers had been comfortable and well looked after, Argan explained that he and his Council were anxious to learn all they could about the Outer World. Because of the thick layer of rock above them, they were unable to monitor radio waves for information. So they had to rely on new colonists for their knowledge of what was happening on the surface.

Of late years such colonists had been few, and the only one for some time was a young boy, without much experience. So the arrival of four obviously knowledgeable young men had excited the Council, and they were waiting with great interest for up-to-date information about the Outer World.

"Perhaps you are equally curious about us," Argan concluded, "for, whilst we know much about your people, you did not even know that we exist."

"Why is that, Argan?" Chris asked. "Why have you not let us know about Cenobia?"

The Members of the Council talked among themselves before their leader replied.

"At one time," he said, "we lived on the surface like you. Our origin is lost in the mists of time, but legend says that we are not of this planet, that we came from beyond the stars. Yet we lived on your Earth until it became covered with ice and the seas froze. Then we came inside the Earth for warmth and shelter and created Cenobia."

"But—is this vast underground world artificial?" exclaimed Morrey. "Have you cut this place out of the solid rock?"

"Not altogether," Argan smiled. "There was a vast unsuspected cave system in existence. We enlarged it until it was big enough to become our home. Then we abandoned the icy Outer World and came to live in this new world which we had created. We intend to remain here always."

"But that doesn't explain why you have never contacted us," Chris reminded him.

"Isn't it obvious?" Argan asked mildly. "Your world is in turmoil—politically, socially, morally and physically. We do not want the contagion that contact with it would bring. Here we live a calm, well-ordered life. All our physical needs are met—partly by creating our own environment, and partly by adapting ourselves over thousands of years to the conditions of our Inner World. This is why we have arranged that anyone entering Cenobia from the Outer World loses all desire to return—just as you have, my friends."

"Er—just so," Chris answered, not daring to look at the others. "I suppose you have other entrances besides the one from the Caves of Drach?"

"Several," Argan nodded, "though for many years we have sealed all of them except the one you used."

"And people coming in spend the rest of their lives with you?"

"Of course—and we make them very happy," Argan assured him.

"But suppose—just suppose—someone didn't want to stay," Morrey asked, "what would you do?"

It was another member of the Council, the one called Ikor, who replied.

"That isn't possible," he said gravely, "but for the sake of your question we will say that it is. Our answer is that we would not permit anyone who has discovered Cenobia to return to the Outer World and so betray the secret of our existence."

"If we did so our very mode of life would be destroyed," the councillor named Skim added. "This we would prevent at all costs."

So that was that, Chris told himself grimly. If the Cenobians were so determined to let no one go back to reveal their existence, then they would undoubtedly use force if the astronauts attempted to return openly. They must, at all costs, prevent Argan and his friends from suspecting that they had escaped the effects of the cavern's drugged atmosphere. They must pretend to settle down in Cenobia whilst they laid their plans to escape with Ian to the surface.

"May we now ask you some questions?" Argan asked politely. "We will tell you more about ourselves later on. Are any wars being fought at the moment in the Outer World?"

For the next hour the Cenobian Council plied the four astronauts with searching questions. Their thirst for knowledge of the Outer World seemed insatiable, and Tony was tempted to suggest that they should visit it and learn all about it for themselves. But he knew what their answer would be to that.

He was getting rather tired of the endless questions. It was a strain trying to avoid any reference to their oxygen masks or to any subject that might direct the attention of the Councillors to them. Fortunately, the other three did most of the talking. Tony himself was intrigued by the source of the golden light, the motive power of the cars, why the Cenobians neither ate nor slept, and whether there were both men and women among them. When he got a chance he put some questions of his own.

"The golden light?" repeated the councillor called Balla. "It's a type of phosphorescence that we have developed. It requires no power and gives off no heat. As you see, it is universal in Cenobia."

"That is why we have no night and day as you have. That is why we have to create a period of artificial night for you Outer Worlders to sleep," Argan added. "Nor do we have seasons like those on the surface. The passage of time is recorded here only by chronometers."

"But why don't you eat and sleep?" Tony persisted. "No one can live long without food and rest."

"We do eat—in a fashion," Argan replied. "I think I've told you before. We take a tablet every twelve hours, and this maintains the health and strength of our bodies and minds. As for sleep—we do not need it. Over many thousands of years—having no light and darkness—we have evolved away from the need for sleep."

"Don't you ever rest?" Tony asked incredulously. "No one can go on for ever without a break."

Argan and the members of the Council smiled.

"Eons ago we used to sleep, as you call it. But it seemed such a waste of time, so we added an ingredient to our food tablets that performs the same function as sleep. After taking one we are completely refreshed."

"There's another question I'd like to ask," Tony said, going rather red. "Er—do you have men and women as we have? You all seem the same to us."

The whole Council burst into laughter.

"Forgive us, my friends," Argan apologized, "but we have been waiting for that question. Always—sooner or later—newcomers ask it. The differences between men and women seem important to them. We wondered how long it would be before one of you posed the query. Let me explain.

"In Cenobia our life is so well ordered that we do not suffer disease or strife as you do. Fatal accidents are rare, and therefore Death is almost unknown. Our tablets enable us to replace worn body tissue, so 'ageing' as you call it, doesn't take place. We help the human beings who join us to live much longer than they would have done on the Outer World, but of course they cannot live almost for ever, as we do. There is, therefore, no need to reproduce ourselves. Our numbers are static and we intend to keep them so."

"What? No one ever dies or is born?" burst out Tony.

"That is really the position," Councillor Skim replied. "Just occasionally there has been an unfortunate occurrence when one of our race has ceased to exist. He has met with a rare accident that our surgeons cannot repair. So his body is reconverted to the chemicals from which it was made. When this happens we get a replacement from our laboratories, which keep a supply of 'eggs'. These are developed and grow into another Cenobian like ourselves."

"We have never needed to have two kinds of people to produce these eggs, as you do," Argan explained. "Since the beginning of time—or, if legend be true, since we came from beyond the stars—we have produced all the new people we require in our laboratories. It is so simple and economical."

But not so interesting, Tony thought to himself.

Even after Argan's explanation, he still didn't know whether to call a Cenobian "he" or "she". He certainly couldn't say "it". So, as the Cenobians seemed very intelligent, Tony—typically male—thought it would be better to settle for "he".

"What makes your cars go?" he asked next. "They're very different from ours."

"So we understand," Argan nodded. "Briefly, we have harnessed the force you call 'gravity'. Perhaps soon we will explain to you how it is done."

Tony was just about to say how welcome this knowledge would be in the Outer World, when he remembered that he mustn't even mention the possibility of taking it back with them.

"What are the latest developments in the science you call astronomy?" Councillor Skim asked. "Do you know anything about it?"

This was Serge's field, and he gave them an account of all the latest theories and discoveries. He explained about pulsars, quasars, black holes, and a host of other pieces of astronomical information. But he carefully avoided any reference to Man's venture into Space.

"That is one thing we envy the Outer World for," Argan said solemnly. "You can gaze on the stars, but we cannot. Maybe your telescopes can show you the place from whence it is said we have come. Perhaps, some day, someone will return to our home."

The Cenobians had no idea that the four young men to whom they were speaking had already taken the first steps on that long journey.

13

"One of the first things we must do is to speak to Ian," Chris told the others after they had returned to their rooms. "We must find out how he feels about Cenobia, and what his memories are of the Outer World."

"If what we believe to be the effect of the drug is correct, he won't want to return with us," Morrey reminded his friends.

"Not if we tell him how upset his grandfather is?" asked Tony.

"We will see. I suspect that the atmosphere of that cavern wipes out all desire to return to the surface, no matter for what reason," said Chris.

"I agree," Serge nodded. "Otherwise some people in the past, who had left homes and families behind, would have struggled back to the surface. It seems that the drug makes the desire to remain here stronger than anything else."

"Then we'll have to kidnap him," grinned Tony, but Chris was quite serious.

"It could come to that, and it would make our return that much more difficult. However, I take it that we won't go back without Ian?"

The other three agreed. This was why they had ventured into the cavern. This was why they must risk upsetting the Cenobians, who were so desperately anxious to preserve their secret.

"And when we get back—are we going to reveal the existence of Cenobia?" asked Serge.

This was a question that was troubling all of them. They could understand the intense desire of the Inner Worlders to avoid the contamination of their way of life by the turbulent Outsiders. Ought the astronauts to respect this desire, or should they tell all they knew in the interests of science?

"I don't know," admitted Chris. "We must give the matter a great deal of thought. If we do tell about all we've found, it won't be long before hordes of people in oxygen masks will be crowding down the cavern and coming to explore Cenobia."

There could be no doubt that the technology of this secret world was, in many fields, well in advance of that known on the surface: the golden light, the gravity cars, synthetic food and much else. Ought this knowledge to be made available to the noisy, bustling world above ground? Or ought it to be preserved with the secret of Cenobian existence? Had they the right to destroy the Inner Worlders' placid way of life as the price of such knowledge? It was a question that, as yet, none of them cared to answer.

"We'll decide when we have to," Chris declared. "Now, how are we going to get Ian out of this place?"

"We ought to see him and talk to him, don't you think?" asked Morrey. "Perhaps we could make him want to return to his grandfather."

"I doubt it," Chris answered. "The effect of that drug seems to be powerful and permanent. Otherwise people would surely have been making their way back over the years."

"You'll notice that the drug doesn't seem to blot out memory," Tony observed. "Argan expected us to remember everything about our world. Ian will remember his grandfather all right, but he won't want to go back."

"Then, as we said, we may have to take him with us against his will," Serge declared. "It will not be pleasant."

"No," sighed Chris, "it will not. But we have promised Mr Yates, so that is what we must do, I'm afraid."

"Our best plan is to get the use of a car," Tony suggested. "We could get hold of Ian, take our kit, and scoot off to the tunnel and cavern before Argan and his friends know about it."

Chris smiled.

"I don't think it will be as easy as that. At the moment we must be the centre of attention in Cenobia. And remember that there's no darkness during which we could slip away."

"We must win their confidence," said Serge. "Then they will let us have a car to wander about at will. There are so many things I should like to learn about Cenobia—its technology, history and social system, to begin with."

So they all agreed that they would make friends with Argan and his fellows, they would learn all they could about them, and then, when the opportunity arose, they would get hold of the boy and make a dash for the tunnel.

The auditorium in the Caves of Drach was filled with a band of about twenty-five men. There was an air of excitement as Whiskers went about giving his final instructions. Mr Yates was watching with close interest, but he preferred not to interfere with the officer, who obviously knew his job.

Four teams or squads were formed, with Whiskers putting himself in charge of "A" squad. The others, "B", "C", and "D", were under the command of Toni, Smith and McKimm respectively. The Scot felt rather annoyed that he was to be in the last squad. He would have preferred to go along with the Wing Commander. Still—he told himself with resignation—someone has to come last to pick up the bits.

The four electric trucks were loaded with oxygen cylinders, telephone cable, the airtight cabins, and stores of food. Whiskers, as a last-minute addition, included an automatic rifle.

"You never know what we might meet," was his rather self-conscious explanation.

"Perhaps a bogey-man, or the Devil himself," teased the other men, but Whiskers put up with their jocular remarks and kept the gun, with ammunition, with him on the first truck.

"Everyone ready?" he called to distract their attention.

A chorus of assent and impatience came in reply.

"Very well, then," he said briskly. "My squad will lead. The others will follow at hundred-metre intervals. Timms, check the telephone cable as we proceed."

Mr Yates had had a camp bed brought down into the auditorium, together with food and drink, so that he would have no need to return to the surface until his expedition came back. Now, with a wave of his hand which was really a salute, Whiskers led "A" squad into the cavern.

There was much light-hearted banter between the men. Whiskers didn't attempt to stop it, for he knew that it was a cover for a slight nervousness. His instruction to walk and not ride on the trucks was chiefly to conserve the batteries, but it was also better for his men to be making the physical effort that walking demanded.

The gleams from two hand-torches lit up the cavern, and they could plainly see the cable that the astronauts had laid snaking its way forward into the darkness. When they had gone a hundred metres they were able to look back and see that "B" squad had entered the cavern. Then their road curved and they could no longer see the entrance or their companions.

Skirting the fallen boulders, even removing some of the smaller ones, "A" squad made rapid progress. Whiskers had a good idea of how the cavern sloped and turned, from the reports that Chris and the others had sent back over the wire. By now the other two squads would have entered the cavern, so after some forty minutes the Wing Commander called a halt so that he could check on all his men and report back to Mr Yates. Everyone, it seemed, was in good shape and anxious to press on. The depths of the Caves of Drach beckoned.

Because they were travelling so much faster than the astronauts, it wasn't long before Whiskers judged that they must be approaching the spot where the drugged atmosphere began. He called a halt and waited for the other squads to catch up.

"This is it, fellows," he called when all his men had assembled. "From now on it's masks for everyone. If any of you feels distressed you must report it at once. 'D' squad will erect their cabin when we come to the end of this telephone cable. Timms, get ready to link our own cable up with it. Ready, everyone? Then it's 'masks on'."

"Excuse me, Mr Greatrex," Smith said, coming up to the Wing Commander. "I managed to get four special masks. They're fitted with radios. I thought——"

"By Jove, Smith, you're a marvel. I ought to have thought of that myself. I was wondering how we could talk to each other. The leader of each squad will wear a radio mask," Whiskers decided. "Then we can communicate with each other easily."

There was a little smile of satisfaction at the corners of Smith's mouth as he, Toni and McKimm put on the radio masks. The Wing Commander had a brief test conversation with each of his squad leaders. Then his truck moved forward and headed off down into the utter blackness. They continued on until they came to the end of the cable that the astronauts had laid.

Then all four vehicles came to a halt, and while Timms connected their own cable "D" squad set about erecting the first of the cabins. Whiskers was tempted to push on, but he decided to wait and see if cabin D was effective.

It was. As soon as the construction had been completed the cabin was filled with air at a slightly higher pressure than the atmosphere outside in the cavern. Whiskers himself went inside, removed his mask, and reported to Mr Yates that their first base had been completed.

"My squad will enter the cabin and take a fifteen-minute break while we eat," Greatrex told the others. "Then, while we press on, each of the other squads will do the same. McKimm, your squad will remain behind at your cabin, but we'll be in constant touch with you. Understood?"

The men nodded, but McKimm was glum about having to remain in the rear. Smith felt the same when, some time later, the Wing Commander said that he wanted to establish their second base with cabin C.

Some six hours after the expedition had entered the cavern all four bases had been established and Whiskers and his men were taking a well-earned rest. It was while he was munching a sandwich in cabin A that the Wing Commander had his idea about leap-frogging.

He knew that some of his men were disappointed at not getting a forward position in the attack on the notorious cavern. Well—he'd give them all a turn at taking the lead. So far there hadn't been much to report. Certainly they had found no explanation about what had happened to his friends. Nor had they discovered any reason why they could not have returned. There seemed no great danger at the moment, so he decided that "D" squad should pack up their cabin. Then they would come forward ahead of "A" squad and re-erect it farther down the cavern. The other two squads would repeat the manoeuvre in turns.

The plan was received by the men with enthusiasm. However, Whiskers made one proviso. He himself would always be with the leading squad.

The arrangement worked well, and the expedition continued its progress into the depths. At all times a sharp lookout was kept for any trace of the astronauts or Ian. The broken torches, together with an expended battery, had been the only signs.

Whiskers reported to Mr Yates at regular intervals, though there was little news. However tension began to mount in the expedition when someone calculated that, with the help of the trucks, they had already progressed as far as the astronauts' supplies of oxygen would have taken them. At any time now they must surely come across some sign of the four.

It was Toni, leader of "B" squad and leading at the time, who first noticed the lessening in the Stygian blackness. At first he thought it must be some hallucination, so he was reluctant to mention it to any of his companions. But when he could doubt it no longer, he pointed it out to the rest of the squad. Several then confessed that they, too, had had the same impression, but it seemed so absurd that they had kept it to themselves. When Whiskers was told he ordered that all lights should be extinguished. Then he drew in a sharp breath. He could see the faint outlines of the other men.

Naturally, there was a lively discussion about the phenomenon among the members of the expedition. Some form of subterranean phosphorescence was the explanation generally accepted. It made everyone all the more eager to press on.

It was shortly after this discovery that the first of the electric trucks, that attached to "B" squad, stopped, and an examination showed that its batteries were completely exhausted. It had to be abandoned. Whiskers accepted this setback cheerfully; the other trucks would carry on.

However, this was a warning which he couldn't afford to ignore. If the other three trucks also became immobile, then the transport of the cabins and oxygen would become very laborious. So he decided to call a halt for a rest, refreshment, and a discussion with the other squad commanders. After a time Whiskers gave his decision.

He and the other commanders, Toni, Smith and McKimm, would take the most lively of the trucks (judging by the battery meter), carry oxygen only, and advance as far and as fast as they could. Three of them would go on foot, leaving one only—the driver—to ride. They hoped thus to reduce the drain on its batteries to a minimum.

As for the other men, they would re-form into three squads and continue the leap-frogging advance, though it would be slow and laborious.

"McKimm, better let Timms have your radio mask. We won't have the telephone with us," Whiskers said, "so we'll try and keep contact as long as possible by radio."

The chauffeur and Timms exchanged masks in one of the cabins. McKimm was sorry to have to part with his, but it was a small price to pay for being included in the advance squad. He grinned ruefully as he adjusted his new mask and stepped outside to join the others.

"The light is getting brighter," Smith pointed out after the advance squad had been going for some time. "I believe we could put out our torches."

"We'll do that," Whiskers agreed.

This phosphorescent light was certainly a convenience. There would be no question of having to grope forward in the dark—no matter what happened. The Wing Commander radioed a report back to Timms, who promptly relayed it over the phone to Mr Yates.

The billionaire was interested in this strange phenomenon. When Ian and those four young men had come back safely it might be worth while to explore this strange cavern more thoroughly and on a massive scale. The fluorescence would be invaluable in mines and underground railways, and even to light up cities at night. The saving in electricity alone would be incalculable.

So—though it didn't know it—Cenobia was about to be invaded by an expedition of twenty-four men, who would be followed, undoubtedly, by the countless minions of Ebenezer Yates bent on its commercial exploitation.

14

Chris's first meeting with young Ian Campbell was accidental. It happened when the astronauts were arriving for a second session with the Cenobian Council. As they were entering the building Ian was just leaving with Councillor Skim. Chris and the boy collided.

"Hello! Your name is Ian, isn't it?" Chris said, realizing that this was too good an opportunity to miss. "Are you settling down here?"

"I love it," Ian replied promptly. "It's smashing. I wish my grandfather would come. He'd like it too."

Councillor Skim was being engaged in conversation by the other three astronauts, who recognized at once that this was Chris's chance to talk to the boy.

"Wouldn't you like to return to your grandfather?" Chris asked, taking a risk.

Ian looked at him incredulously.

"Of course not," he said. "Whoever would want to leave this wonderful place and its great people?"

"But you're fond of your grandfather, aren't you?"

Tears filled the boy's eyes for a second.

"Yes," he said tremulously. "That's why I wish he'd come and live in Cenobia. He'd be so much happier here than up there."

Chris could see that the drug had done its insidious work. Ian would never accompany them back to the surface willingly.

Had they the right to force him back if he was happier here in Cenobia? Before Chris could debate the question in his mind, Ian spoke again.

"You've come to live here, too. You like it, don't you?"

"Of course," Chris replied quickly. "The people here are very kind."

Councillor Skim had overheard the last remark and beamed his pleasure.

"Soon you will become one of us," he assured the astronaut. "You will live as we do and be as happy as we are."

Tony had a thought.

"Shall we get a car?" he asked. It would be an essential for making their escape.

"Of course," the councillor told him. "After your next visit to the Council you will be given a better house in which to live, and you will be taught how to drive one of our cars."

"But shall we be able to get a car of our own?" Tony persisted.

Councillor Skim looked puzzled.

"Do you not understand," he asked, "that in Cenobia we do not 'own' anything? Cars are for anyone to use, just as houses may be lived in by all. We do not have what I believe you call 'private property'. Here there is no need."

It's certainly a rum place, Tony thought to himself, if you can't even call the shirt on your back your own. Still—the Cenobians seemed happy enough without money or possessions. He supposed that if they had never been used to them they'd never miss them. This was certainly a different society from any that existed on the surface. Here life seemed unhurried, even placid. It was hard to believe that Cenobians could ever be angry or violent. Yet no doubt they could be if their secret were at stake.

With a cordial wave Councillor Skim led Ian away, and the astronauts went on into the Council Chamber.

There followed another searching session with Argan and his friends. Towards the end Chris became convinced that many of the questions were designed to test the effectiveness of the drug, so his answers had to be very guarded. But it seemed that the Cenobians suspected nothing. They were satisfied and friendly.

"You may now use a better home and any of our cars," said Argan, beaming at them. "You have much to see and to learn about us. You are going to be very happy as new citizens of Cenobia."

"I'm sure we are," Chris replied. He hated to deceive these friendly people, but it had to be done if the astronauts were to fulfil their mission. Chris resolved that he would try to harm the Cenobians as little as possible.

It was a point that he took up with the other three as they were eating.

"I like these Cenobians," he declared, "and I hope we can get away without any trouble. I'd hate to hurt any of them."

"So would we all," Morrey agreed, "but if they do resist our escape with Ian, we may be forced to."

Chris was silent for a time. Then he spoke.

"It isn't only that I don't want to hurt them physically. We could do them far greater harm by betraying them. When we get back to the surface I don't think we should reveal anything about this Inner World."

Tony and Morrey looked at him with astonishment.

"What! Not tell about this fabulous discovery?" Tony burst out. "But we've no right to keep it to ourselves. The whole world will want to know."

"That's just what I fear," Chris answered gravely. "I believe that Argan and his friends are quite right when they say that contact with our civilization would destroy them. I don't think we have the right to do that."

"You can't be serious," Morrey said. "We have discovered, here, a different race with a technology that we know nothing about. We can—we must—tell everything when we get home."

"I agree with Chris," Serge declared. "These people have evolved what is, to them, a perfect system of living. It would be wrong of us to destroy it. And destroy it we should."

"But think of the good it would do to our own people," Tony protested. "If we knew how to make the fluorescent light, and cars like theirs, think what a difference it would make. You know we're using up all our resources of coal and oil. What will happen afterwards?"

"We shall have to adopt a simpler mode of life," answered Chris. "Or discover the Cenobian technology for ourselves."

"Chris and Serge, consider this," Morrey said seriously. "The Cenobians have discovered a great deal about nutrition, and how to live off synthetic food and tablets. On the surface there are millions of people who exist barely above starvation level. And there are tens of thousands who die every year from malnutrition. Don't you think we have a right—in fact, a duty—to take back with us knowledge that would save countless thousands of lives?"

"And destroy countless thousands down here? No, I don't think we have that right," Chris replied firmly. "I will not be a party to betraying the Cenobians."

"But I will," Morrey declared.

There was a tense silence. For the first time that any of them could remember there was a deep and fundamental division between the four friends. In the past they had had minor differences, but very few. All had been easily resolved and soon forgotten. This was different.

Chris and Serge believed passionately that they had no right to report the existence of Cenobia and so destroy the calm and peace of this secret civilization. Tony and Morrey felt with equal strength that they had an urgent duty to make the technology of the Inner World available for the crying needs of the Outer World. Serge and Chris believed that the surface people would eventually develop the Cenobian skills without the need to contaminate the Inner World in the process. Morrey and Tony believed as firmly that natural resources and millions of lives could be saved by revealing all they had discovered since entering the cavern—to say nothing of the tremendous improvement in the environment and the quality of life on earth that could be the result.

Chris's feelings were in turmoil. He was utterly convinced that his was the right attitude to take, but he was terribly distressed that Tony and Morrey disagreed. He was the natural and accepted leader of the party, but he didn't see how he could use his authority to gag his friends. He knew they would never accept this. It seemed that both Tony and Morrey were determined to pass on all their knowledge, perhaps even at the cost of the friendship of Serge and himself.

It was a thought that horrified Chris. The four of them had been closer than brothers for many years. They had faced the hazards of Space together in a way that, he had thought, had forged an unbreakable bond between them. Now it seemed that the bond was about to break.

The other three were equally distressed. Must they break with their dearest friends on a matter of principle? It was unthinkable that this famous quartet should be irrevocably divided—Chris and Serge on one side, Morrey and Tony on the other. Yet it seemed that they were on the brink of such a division.

"We'll talk about it later," Chris said shortly. "Let's get some rest."

It wasn't that he was tired, but he wanted to be alone in his cabin to think. He flung himself on to his bed, and the room was plunged into darkness. Chris lay on his back staring into the blackness above him.

As far as he was concerned he would reveal nothing about the Cenobians, but this secrecy would be useless if Morrey and Tony told all they knew. Yet how could he stop them? Persuasion was useless. To harm them was unthinkable—yet the happiness of a whole race was at stake.

The golden light flooded the room once more, for Chris had shot off his bed as a terrible thought struck him. What would Mr Yates have been doing all this time? They had been in the Underworld for more than three days. It was unlikely that the American had been idle, Americans are not like that. Chris was sure that the old man would be organizing a rescue operation. He would bring into play his great business ability and all the resources of his vast empire.

If anyone could organize the invasion of Cenobia it was Ebenezer Yates. Even now his rescue expedition might be on its way. And if it succeeded in penetrating into the Inner World, then Cenobia's peaceful isolation would be gone for ever.

Chris paced the room in mental agony. He liked these gentle people, understood their fear of the Outer World, and would do anything in his power to preserve their mode of life. But how could he stop a full-scale rescue attempt from above? How could he persuade Tony and Morrey to respect the Cenobians' secret? Should he consult with Serge?

He remembered that he'd reported the drugged atmosphere in the cavern, but he had had no chance to reveal that its extent was limited, or that the cavern became a smooth tunnel opening up into a fantastic underworld. If Mr Yates was mounting an expedition it would, without doubt, carry vast supplies of oxygen to enable the rescuers to penetrate to a great depth. Once they had become aware of the golden light and the artificial tunnel they would report back to the auditorium. That would be the end of Cenobia.

Should he make one more appeal to Morrey and Tony? No, he thought with a sigh, it would be useless. They were convinced their higher duty lay in seeing that Cenobian technology became universally available. If it harmed the Cenobians themselves, that was unfortunate. Millions of people on the surface would benefit immeasurably.

Yes, Chris could well understand how his friends thought, and he had to admit the strength of their arguments. But he couldn't bring himself to betray Argan and his friends, from whom they had received nothing but kindness.

Argan! Argan? Chris stopped abruptly. An idea had flashed into his mind.

15

His heart was beating rapidly as he tiptoed past the rooms of his three companions. He almost held his breath as he reached the exit. He was about to step cautiously outside when Meno appeared.

"Is there anything you need, sir?"

"Yes," replied Chris in a low voice, "I must see Argan. Urgently. I need to see him at once without my companions. Can you get a message to him?"

Meno looked curiously at this man from the Outer World, but he was too polite to ask questions.

"Certainly, sir. Shall I ask Argan to visit you?"

"No. Tell him to send for me—alone. Hurry, Meno. It's urgent."

With a little bow the Cenobian turned and climbed into one of the cars parked nearby. He glided away silently and Chris slipped back to his room. There was no sound from the other rooms.

"They're all asleep," he breathed.

But they were not. Morrey, Tony and Serge were each pretending to be asleep, not knowing that the others were doing the same. They were all turning this ghastly situation over in their minds. Was this to be the break-up of their friendship? Each thought he was in the right, but none of them wanted to see this dreadful thing happen. Chris lay down on his bed, but he couldn't rest. He got up again and paced the room, waiting for the summons from Argan.

Though it was only half an hour in coming, the time seemed an eternity. There was a knock on the door and Meno appeared.

"Argan would like to see you, sir, if you have rested," the Cenobian said in a normal voice.

The other three doors opened and the strained faces of Morrey, Serge and Tony appeared round them.

"Argan wishes to see only your Leader," Meno said, addressing them all. "Refreshment is on its way to you. Will you please wait here until I return."

Chris tried his best to look puzzled at the summons.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," he told the others. Then he followed Meno.

Argan was alone in the small room to which Meno conducted Chris, and he greeted him gravely but courteously.

As soon as Meno had withdrawn Chris took a deep breath and plunged into his story. He revealed that they had escaped the effects of the drug, that they planned to return to the surface, and that while Serge and he wished to preserve the secret of Cenobia's existence, Tony and Morrey were determined to reveal all they knew. At this the Cenobian became very agitated, and when Chris mentioned his fear that the Inner World would soon be invaded by a rescue expedition, Argan went to pieces completely.

"Then—all this, all our lives will be destroyed," he gasped.

"Is there nothing I can do?" Chris asked desperately. He was thinking that even if Tony and Morrey could be persuaded or prevented from telling all they knew about Cenobia, the invaders would be impossible to control. But he noticed with relief that Argan did not once contemplate violent measures. It would have been easy for the Cenobians to kill his friends and himself, and destroy any strangers entering their world. But perhaps they had lived in peace and harmony for so long that they were now incapable of contemplating such drastic action.

"Our race, our whole way of life, is about to perish," Argan moaned in anguish. "Our culture, which we have preserved pure from time immemorial, is on the point of being destroyed. Is there nothing we can do to save ourselves?"

"Argan," Chris said suddenly, putting his hand on the Cenobian's shoulder, "have you no drug that could make us forget everything about Cenobia?"

"Of course we have such a drug. But even if your friends could be persuaded to take it, how would that save us from the people who you say may be coming to rescue you?"

"Look, Argan, give me some of that drug and I'll see that we all take it. But also let us go back through the tunnel before a rescue team has time to get down here. If we met them, there would be no need for them to go any further. They wouldn't have discovered you, and we should have forgotten you. Your secret would still be safe."

Were Cenobians capable of tears? Chris didn't know, but Argan's eyes certainly shone.

"My friend, you would do this for us?"

"I will. I'll have to slip the drug into our food, so see it's in a suitable form. And its action had better be delayed until we reach the cavern. Ian must take it too."

"Will the rescuers from above be content to return when you meet them? Or will their curiosity lead them on?"

"I'll persuade them to go back. I must."

"But if you, too, have lost your memory of us, why should you try to stop them from discovering our world? You will not remember that we have a secret to preserve."

"Give me the drug in capsule form and I'll take it later. When we are gone you must destroy the tunnel and seal the cavern. That will stop other people from following us. Now I must get back to the others."

"What will you tell them?"

"That I've persuaded you to let us return to the surface, taking Ian with us."

"Which is quite true," Argan acknowledged with a smile. "My friend, I can never thank you enough."

When Chris told the others that the Cenobians were going to let them depart and to take Ian with them, they could hardly believe it. But Chris told them that they would be leaving in a very short time—after they had eaten, in fact.

The news was so unexpected and welcome that they forgot for the time the serious division between them, or if it did enter their minds, they avoided the subject. There was much to talk about, much to plan, for their return with Ian.

"One thing we shall have to do," Chris said, "is to persuade the boy to come with us. Remember he took the drug. He has no desire to go back to the surface—even to see his grandfather."

"We'll talk to him," Tony declared confidently. "After all, he can always return later if he wants to, can't he?"

Chris didn't answer, but in the chatter of the others his silence wasn't noticed. A few moments later two cars pulled up. In the first were Argan and Ian. In the second were several of the Cenobian Councillors.

"We have come to bid you farewell," Argan said, gripping the hand of each of them in turn, "and to wish you a safe journey back to your own country. I have told the boy, Ian, that he is to go back with you."

"But I don't want to go," protested Ian. "I'd rather stay here."

"Oh, come now, Ian," Tony said, going up to the boy and putting his arm round his shoulders, "you want to see your grandfather again, don't you? And what about Smith and McKimm?"

Ian hung his head without speaking, and shuffled from foot to foot.

"My young friend," Argan said firmly, "you must return with Chris at this time."

"You come back with us, Ian," Tony said, "and you can visit Cenobia again. I'm sure Argan will let you come during school holidays. And I'll tell you what. I'll come with you!"

The Cenobian Leader and Chris exchanged quick glances at this, but neither spoke. At last, with obvious reluctance, Ian said, "I'll come."

Only Chris was aware of the strain beneath the friendly talk with Argan and his Councillors. He felt sure that the Leader had told his colleagues everything, but they concealed their feelings very well.

"We must give you a good meal before you go," Argan said heartily. "Meno will be here shortly."

"Er—no, thank you," grinned Tony. "We'll be having steak and chips very shortly."

"But I insist," Argan said with a slightly forced smile.

Chris hastily seconded him. "Thank you, Argan. We'll be glad to eat our last meal with you. It would be ill-mannered of us to refuse."

"Oh, well, if you put it like that we'd better eat," sighed Tony, "but I did want to leave plenty of room for apple pie and cream when we get out."

At that Meno brought in five dishes, including one for Ian. Now that he'd agreed to return with the astronauts Ian talked about persuading his grandfather to pay Argan a visit.

"I'm sure they would get on famously together," he said as he tucked into the chunks of synthetic food. Chris and the others were eating as well, but Chris had noticed Meno's careful selection of his own dish. While the Outer Worlders were eating, their Cenobian hosts each took a small tablet from the boxes which they carried with them.

"Ugh!" exclaimed Tony, "your diet isn't very interesting. What do you do when you have a party?"

The chatter among the astronauts was light-hearted, and occasionally the Cenobians joined in. Only Chris was aware of the desperate tension that lay behind their polite remarks and forced smiles. He hoped that the memory drug in his companions' food would do its work. He must hurry them to the tunnel before any rescuers could break through.

He had already explained to Argan how he and his friends had escaped the effects of the drug, and Argan had asked about the masks and oxygen. While the others were sorting out their loads, Argan took Chris to one side.

"We have neutralized the atmosphere in the cavern," he said.

"But we must still take our masks and oxygen," replied Chris. "The others must not suspect that you know how we escaped being drugged."

Argan looked cautiously round and then handed Chris a capsule. "Take this, my friend," he said. "Take it as and when you will. If your plan works we shall be saved at least for some time, and we shall be eternally grateful to you."

"But it won't be long before other people come down the cavern," Chris whispered back, and Argan gave a sad smile.

"We know," he said. "So we have decided to follow your advice. When you have returned we shall seal the cavern—perhaps for all time. Our next visitor might not be as kind as you have been."

The excitement of the return was infectious. Soon the astronauts and Ian were laughing and talking together, and Chris wondered if Argan's drug was beginning to take effect. As for himself, he felt a mixture of happiness at returning the boy to his grandfather, and sadness at leaving the Inner World and its people. They had, he believed, so very much to teach us who live on the surface.

"We will take you to the tunnel," Argan told them as a small fleet of cars drew up. "Then you will have to return on your own."

They piled into the cars, as excited as schoolboys. Even

Chris laughed and joked with the others. Argan and his fellow Councillors accompanied them more sedately in other cars.

The rocky walls and roof began to close in and ahead they could see the smooth lines of the tunnel. At its mouth the convoy stopped.

"It is here that we part," Argan told Ian and the astronauts. "May you have a safe journey home."

"We have had a wonderful time," Morrey assured the Cenobian party, "and we'll be back before long."

At this Argan and the Councillors only smiled. Meanwhile Tony was trying hard to remember something. He had meant to ask Argan if he could take a Cenobian car back to the surface with him, a request which the Councillor would have had to refuse. Luckily Tony puzzled in vain to recall his intention.

They shouldered their packs cheerfully, carefully guarding their one remaining torch. Then, with gay waves to the Cenobians, Chris and his four companions strode off into the tunnel. As they walked up its steady slope they talked about their adventures in the Underworld. Ian joined in, but Chris kept silent.

"I wonder if the Cenobians work," mused Tony. "I expect some of them have to, if it's only to make cars, or build houses, or produce their diet tablets. I wish I'd asked—er—you know—the Leader."

Morrey paused and struck his forehead.

"That's funny," he said. "I don't remember his name either. Do you, Serge?"

The Russian thought it was Sargan, or something like that, but he wasn't sure. The more they talked the more their memory of the immediate past seemed to be fading. Chris listened quietly to his companions as they marched along. Now they couldn't even remember the name of the strange place in which they had stayed.

As the five of them continued their climb up the tunnel, the golden light began, imperceptibly, to get less.

"It's getting dark," Serge said at length. "Who has the torch?"

Morrey produced it and switched it on. The beam pierced the gloom in front of them. "Funny," said Tony. "The light was better farther down."

So even the memory of the golden light was fading, Chris told himself with satisfaction, and he noticed that now his companions were no longer talking about Cenobia at all. Everything that had happened from the moment they had first breathed the drugged atmosphere on their downward journey had been wiped away.

"I wonder how long we've been down here in this cavern?" asked Ian. "Do you think my grandfather will be waiting for me? Will he be cross?"

"He'll be waiting for you all right," smiled Morrey. "And so will Smith and McKimm. I don't suppose he'll be too cross now that you're going back safely."

But the boy didn't seem to be listening.

"Look!" he shouted, pointing ahead. "Lights!"

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It was Smith who saw it!

At first he thought it was his imagination, but a few seconds later he was sure. There was a tiny point of light ahead.

Though the phosphorescence in the cavern was increasing slowly, it was still very gloomy, and the light ahead shone clearly. Smith yelled out excitedly over his mask radio and pointed to what he could see.

"It's them," bellowed Whiskers. "It must be!"

Even though reason told him that over that distance and in that darkness he couldn't be seen, the Wing Commander waved excitedly to whoever was shining the light.

"Hurry," he radioed to the others. "They may need our help. Switch our lights on and off and see if they respond."

They did. Smith, who was driving the truck, extinguished its lights and then switched them on again. He did this several times—and the distant light came and went in answer. By now McKimm, who had no radio in his mask, had become aware of what was happening. He signalled to Whiskers to let him drive the truck, and the Wing Commander agreed. He jumped aboard and Smith joined Whiskers and Toni on foot. Without knowing it they had increased their pace almost to a trot. It was a great temptation to the chauffeur to race ahead of the others, but he knew that Mr Greatrex would tear a strip off him if he did.

In his excitement Whiskers almost forgot to report back to

Timms. It was only when Timms inquired what were the strange messages that he was picking up that the Wing Commander burst out with the news that they could see a light ahead, that they had signalled to it, and that it had responded.

"Thank God," breathed Ebenezer Yates when, a few seconds later, the good news came to him over the telephone wire. Or was it good news? No doubt someone was returning with that light. But were all four of the young men safe? And had they found any sign of his grandson? He begged for an answer as quickly as possible.

"We'll know in a few minutes," Whiskers radioed back. "We're moving forward as fast as we can and whoever has that light is coming to meet us."

"I can see them," yelled McKimm, forgetting that no one could hear him because he had no radio. Before anyone could stop him he had accelerated the truck and raced ahead towards where four—no, five—figures were stumbling out of the gloom. Smith and Toni were hot on his heels, with Whiskers puffing up behind.

"They're not wearing masks," Smith called back in surprise. "What's happened?"

The two parties had now met. McKimm was hugging Ian and Whiskers was shaking hands violently with the four astronauts at once. Because of his mask it was some seconds before any of them recognized the man who was doing this war-dance around them.

"It's—no, it can't be!" gasped Chris.

"Whiskers!" yelled Morrey and Tony together, while Serge signalled to their old friend that there was no longer any need to wear masks. As soon as he understood Whiskers whipped his off, rapidly followed by the others.

The excitement was fantastic. Questions showered on Ian and the astronauts, while Chris listened intently to their replies.

He need not have worried, for the Cenobian memory drug had worked effectively. His four companions reported that they had breathed the strange atmosphere of the cavern, must have become unconscious, and had recovered only a short time before. Ian remembered wandering off into the cavern and then becoming frightened. He, too, must have passed out, and when he came round he saw the four astronauts who had come to seek him. All five hurried back the way they had come, and what a relief it had been to see a light shining ahead. They knew, then, that someone had come to meet them.

Whiskers insisted that Ian should ride back on the truck with McKimm, with Smith sitting beside them. The Wing Commander and his four friends plodded on behind.

"I can't understand why we don't have to wear masks," Whiskers said. "What's happened?"

Morrey scratched his head in an effort to remember.

"We weren't wearing them when we regained consciousness," he said, "and we felt all right. So we decided it wasn't necessary to wear them any more."

"But I do not understand," Toni said to the other Tony. "Why does not the drug in the air affect us any more?"

"I expect it's because we've got used to it. You can get used to anything in time."

Before long they met the other squads, who had been waiting impatiently for rescuers and rescued to emerge from the blackness. Again there were questions and congratulations.

"Come on. Let's get out of here," Whiskers commanded at last. "Run the trucks until they give out, then abandon them. We can recover them later."

So the Wing Commander led the joyful party towards the entrance. But just as they caught their first glimpse of the brilliantly lit auditorium, every man was flung to the ground by a violent rush of air! It had roared up from the depths of the cavern. Great clouds of dust blotted out all light, and they gasped for breath.

"What—what's happened?" Morrey managed to ask.

"There must have been a fall," Toni spluttered, spitting the dust out of his mouth. "I have been near a rock-fall before. The roof of the cave falls in and the air is squeezed out. But this is worse than any I have known."

"Gosh," Whiskers gasped, "then we've all had a narrow escape. The jolly old cave has fallen in, and we're just getting out in time."

The rush of air had caused confusion in the auditorium, but the lights had remained on, and Mr Yates wept openly with relief when he saw the dirty and dishevelled party emerge from the swirling clouds of dust.

"Ian!" he called. "Ian!"

The boy ran forward and flung himself into his grandfather's arms.

Chris watched with a tired smile. He was feeling weak, not so much from the physical strain he had undergone as from the heavy knowledge that he bore. He alone knew the secret of the Caves of Drach.

That rock-fall! Everyone thought it was a natural phenomenon and that they had had a lucky escape. But Chris knew better. Argan had effectively sealed off the cavern, so that never more would a wanderer from the Caves of Drach stray into the Cenobians' peaceful Underworld.

It was a joyful party that met in the ballroom of Mr Yates's hotel: Whiskers and his men, Smith, McKimm, Toni, the four astronauts and the boy Ian.

"I cannot begin to tell you how grateful I am to you all," Mr Yates began. "When that young rascal of a grandson of mine took it into his head to explore the caves, I thought I had seen the last of him. Now, thanks to you four young men, and also to you, Wing Commander, and your team, Ian has been brought back and no one is any the worse."

"That's all right, sir," beamed Whiskers. "It's been a pleasure. Any time you want our services again——"

"I don't think I shall. At least not in the same way. You see, I have ordered the entrance to the cavern to be sealed for ever. I don't want anyone to undergo the same ordeal that I've experienced these last few days. To compensate for the air coming from the cavern I shall have a ventilation shaft sunk from the surface to the auditorium. Then I shall hand back the Caves of Drach to the Spanish Government with my compliments."

"You will not ask for compensation?" Smith asked in surprise.

The billionaire smiled.

"No," he said emphatically. "I've had all the compensation I want." And he looked affectionately at Ian.

That night in bed, Chris lay staring into the darkness. It was hard to believe the adventures that had befallen him during the last few days. He wondered how many people would accept his word if he revealed the story of Cenobia and its happy people. Of all the inhabitants who live on the surface, he was the only one who knew of the wonderful Inner World. Only he remembered Argan, Skim, Meno and the others. Only he recalled the Cenobian cars, food and houses.

How right Argan had been to want to prevent contact with the Outer World. The two races would not mix. Not until we on the surface have conquered our greed, selfishness, aggression and pride shall we be fit to meet the Cenobians, Chris thought. When would that be? In a hundred years? A thousand? Who knows?

Chris sat up in bed and switched on his light. On a table beside the bed, there was a glass of water and a capsule—the one that Argan had given him.

For a long time Chris stared at it, trying to recall all that he had learned in the world of golden light. Then he reached for it and held it between his fingers.

Should he take it, or not?